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BACKSLIDING

W. P. LOCKHART.







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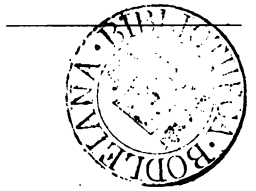


BACKSLIDING.

BY

W. P. LOCKHART,

LIVERPOOL.



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PREFACE.

I AM told that a preface is seldom read. It cannot therefore be too short. Gladly would I omit it altogether, were it not needful to offer a word of explanation in connexion with the appearance of this little volume.

It contains the substance of six sermons, preached to the Christian Church in which I have the privilege of ministering the word of life. Having been found useful when spoken, they are here reproduced for the benefit of whom it may concern. They were not originally prepared because of any special backsliding known to exist amongst us, but with the thought that Scripture teaching has its aspect of warning as well as of rebuke. In seeking to bring out this truth the biographies of the Bible have been largely used, as well to encourage the study of the Book, as to remind us that "whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning."

The fact that these pages have been written

out in odd portions of time, snatched for the most part from the numerous engagements of business life, must serve as an apology for crudities of style and other faults which the reader may discover. My earnest desire and fervent prayer is, that the ready-to-halt may be warned of his danger, and the backslider drawn back into the fold. Should any such happy result ensue from the reading of these pages, all the glory will be given to Him who alone is worthy —our Triune Jehovah, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

WM. P. LOCKHART.

Liverpool, 1875.

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER I. PAGE

THE SOLEMN WARNING - - - - - 1

CHAPTER II.

BACKSLIDING IN HEART - - - - - 17

CHAPTER III.

LOVE OF THE WORLD - - - - - 32

CHAPTER IV.

LUXURY AND EASE - - - - - - 45

CHAPTER V.

BITTER EXPERIENCE - - - - - 63

CHAPTER VI.

HAPPY RESTORATION - - - - - 74

CHAPTER VII.

ADDRESS TO THE CHRISTIAN READER - - - 89.

CHAPTER VIII.

ADDRESS TO THE UNCONVERTED READER - - 9A

BACKSLIDING.

I.

THE SOLEMN WARNING.

"Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God."—HEB. iii. 12.

WHEN we see a man walking with uncertain tread on the edge of a precipice, we earnestly warn him of his danger; so the Apostle, knowing the deceitfulness of the human heart, and the dangerous path the believer is often called to tread, solemnly warns his readers with the word, "Take heed, brethren."

The Epistle to the Hebrews, I need scarcely remind you, abounds in such warnings addressed to the children of God. In other parts of Scripture the Christian life is looked at from the Divine side. Its origin, its nature, its sustenance, its perpetuity, are set forth as connected with the sovereignty and power of God. In this epistle it appears to me to be looked at mainly from the human standpoint. Its dangers, its hindrances, its varying experience, its tendency to

come to a sudden termination, are dwelt upon, and hence its frequent warnings. In order rightly to understand the exhortation before us, we must directly connect it with the words of the sixth verse, and read the intervening verses, composed of a quotation from the ninety-fifth Psalm, as a parenthesis. The whole passage then runs thus; "But Christ as a Son over His own house; whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end. Wherefore take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God."

In considering this warning we shall first notice *the possibility of a backsliding state of heart existing unknown to the individual himself;* secondly, *the fact that this unconscious backsliding may exist in quarters where we least suspect it;* and lastly, *the true safeguard against this gradual and often unconscious declension.*

I. *There is much unconscious backsliding.* A Christian is often found harbouring unbelief in his heart without knowing it. He may even have turned round and be departing from the living God before he is fully aware of it. Observe what a significant sentence follows our text. Allusion is there made to the believer's being "hardened through the deceitfulness of sin." In a petrifying spring articles are often placed under the dropping water, and as it trickles down upon them they are gradually hardened

till they become like the very stone. So is it with sin. Gently and slowly it seeks its way into the heart, and hardens it day by day, even while the possessor of that heart may be more or less unconscious of the change that is going on. This is backsliding. Sin permitted, the heart gradually hardened, unbelief taking his place on the throne, and *then,* departure from the living God.

As illustrations of this I invite you to consider two cases: one, that of Samson, taken from the Old Testament; the other, Peter, from the New. May the Holy Spirit so rest upon us that the truth may be brought home to our hearts in power.

Samson was a Nazarite. We are told so in his own words, "I have been a Nazarite unto God from my mother's womb" (Judges xvi. 17). If we turn to Numbers vi. we find the laws of Nazaritism laid down. At present I only wish to dwell on one point. In v. 2 we read of those who took the vow of the Nazarite "to separate themselves unto the Lord." In v. 5 we read that "he separateth himself unto the Lord," and in v. 8, "All the days of his separation he is holy unto the Lord." A Nazarite, therefore, was a man separated in holiness unto the Lord. Such an one was Samson. Further, he was a man of faith. In the eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews, where we are conducted by the Apostle through the portrait gallery of those who lived by faith, the picture of Samson is not found wanting, for in v. 32 we read, "And what shall I more say? for

the time would fail me to tell of Gedeon, and of Barak, and of Samson, ... who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions." Whatever may be our difficulties therefore, at this distance of time, in quite understanding the character of Samson, he is clearly marked out as one of God's people, a man of faith, separated unto the Lord.

If we turn again to Judges xvi. we shall be able to note the downward steps in the career of this remarkable servant of God. He first formed an unholy alliance with Delilah, and he then became an adept in falsehood, for in vv. 7, 11, and 14, plain lies are told. Sins generally go about in gangs; and where uncleanness is indulged, other forms of iniquity find a congenial lodging. Finally, hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, he told her his great secret, where his marvellous strength, which God had given him, lay. Unbelief now seemed to be reigning in his heart. He was departing from the living God. His locks were shorn. "She began to afflict him, and his strength went from him" (v. 19). Then came the crisis. The old familiar cry, "The Philistines be upon thee, Samson," once more sounded in his ear. Then he awoke, and said, "I will go out as at other times before, and shake myself. *And he wist not that the Lord was departed from him*" (v. 20).

We read of Ephraim, "Strangers have devoured his strength, and he knoweth it not; yea, gray hairs are here and there upon him, yet he knoweth not"

(Hos. vii. 9). So was it with Samson, "He wist not that the Lord had departed from him." And what was the result? Israel, not knowing that the Lord had left her, "presumed to go up" against Amalek, but was surely routed (Numb. xiv. 43—45), and in like manner was Samson overthrown. The Philistines, whom he had so easily overcome when he went against them in the power of the Lord, "took him, and put out his eyes, and brought him down to Gaza and bound him with fetters of brass; and he did grind in the prison-house" (v. 21).

Does not this read like the history of all backsliding? The gradual and often unconscious decline, and then the sudden crisis or emergency. The felt powerlessness and the consequent defeat. Am I speaking to any who are now in this state? Is there a man to whom prayer has now become a mere form, gone through mechanically, and often omitted altogether; for whom the word of God, once so precious, has almost, if not altogether, lost its relish; and to whom the conscious enjoyment of Christ's presence is now a thing of the past? Can it be that the Lord has departed from any of you, and that you know it not? If so, your strength is gone indeed. There will be, sooner or later, a fearful awaking, a crisis, a sudden assault of the enemy. You will go out as at other times to shake yourself, but it will be in vain. You will be, you must be, thrown down. Be warned, I beseech you, ere it is too late, by the sad example of Samson. Take heed, oh "take heed, lest there be

in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God."

Passing on to an illustration of similar truth afforded by New Testament Scripture, we proceed to consider the fall of Peter. His case resembles that of Samson, not only because he seems to have been unconscious of his danger, but also because his fall was preceded by several distinct steps downward.

Peter not only made a clear confession of Christ, and was pronounced by Him to be taught of God (Matt. xvi. 17), but he was also one of three apostles selected by the Lord to be with Him on three most important occasions. It becomes, therefore, a matter of the deepest interest to inquire what it was that led to the fall of this chosen vessel. In Luke xxii. 31 we read our Lord's solemn warning, "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat." The "you" refers to all the apostles. The next verse, however, has special reference to Peter, as though peculiar danger beset him. "But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not; and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren." Notice, it is "thee," and not "you," in this verse. This warning leads us to think of Job, and Satan's permitted power over him for a season, but we cannot dwell upon it now, further than to say that we have here, as elsewhere in Scripture, a glimpse of the spiritual warfare that is going on around us; a real personal devil seeking to destroy the people of God, who are upheld by the power of the Lord (com-

pare Zech. iii. 1—5). Peter's response or protest is that to which I wish especially to call your attention. It is contained in v. 33, but it is given more fully in Matt. xxvi. 33, 35. "Peter answered and said unto Him, Though all shall be offended because of Thee, yet will I never be offended," and again in v. 35, "Though I should die with Thee, yet will I not deny Thee." Several things are to be noticed about Peter's frame of mind as set forth in these words. They help us to understand subsequent events. First, Peter showed *a painful amount of self-confidence.* It was I—I—I; self was evidently uppermost. It is often said that when a man begins a sentence with the first personal pronoun, there is no nonsense that may not follow. One may certainly apply this to Peter. He gloried in his own strength, not knowing that it was utter weakness. "I will never be offended." "I will never deny Thee." "I will die with Thee." Oh! brethren, notice that self-confidence was his ruin, and take heed.

Further, there was seen in Peter a *Pharisaic spirit in boasting that he was better than others.* "Though all men shall be offended because of Thee, yet will I never be offended." It was as if he had said, "Yes, there are James and John, worthy fellows in their way, but I am not so sure of them, they may flinch in the hour of trial; there are the other apostles, many of them have good points, but they may fall; there's my own brother Andrew, whom I so love, and who himself brought me to the Saviour, I sometimes tremble even for him, but I will never fall. I, Peter, oh!

no, it is not to be thought of for a moment. I will never be offended." Depend upon it, brethren, we are in a bad state of soul when we think ourselves better than others, when exhortations spoken in our hearing are applied to this one and that one, and when warnings are passed round to others instead of being taken to ourselves.

Also Peter *evidently prided himself on being ready to do some great thing for Christ, and so lost sight of the duty of the passing hour.* "Lord, I am ready to go with Thee both into prison and to death," was his proud boast (Luke xxii. 33). Yes, nothing short of the martyr's crown could satisfy Peter in his present vain-glorious condition. But what followed? The scene in the garden. And what was Peter about now? Asleep! One hesitates to say there was sarcasm in the word of the Lord Jesus, but surely there was something very like it: "What! could ye not watch with me one hour?" As if He had said, "Why, Peter, you talked just now of dying with me, could you not then watch with me one single hour?" Brethren, are we not often in a similar case? thinking only of doing great things for Jesus, while we overlook the little things of the passing moment? Do we not sometimes imagine we could die for Christ, while at the same time we make but a poor effort to live for Him? Christians have said to me before now, "I love Christ so, I could die for Him." My answer has always been, "Brother, Christ has died for you, He wants you to live for Him." We have heard those

talk of dying for Him, whom we would have been glad to see keeping their temper in a moment of provocation, more scrupulously honest in business, more truthful, more unselfish, more meek. Dying grace will doubtless be granted when death has to be suffered in testimony for Jesus. Let us in the meantime look, not to the great thing, but to the thousand and one small things which go to make up the sum of Christian living. We see then the disposition in Peter which preceded his fall. He thought much of himself, considered himself better than others, and looked to doing some great thing to shew devotion to the Lord.

We must next look at the steps in Peter's downward progress. These are given most fully in the Gospel by Mark. This fact is not without its significance, for by almost universal consent it is admitted that Mark's Gospel was written under the personal supervision of the Apostle Peter. That this Gospel should contain the fullest details of Peter's fall, therefore, shews us how thoroughly he had been humbled, and how fully restored. May not this be one of the ways in which he obeyed the Lord's command, "Strengthen thy brethren"? If we turn to Mark xiv. we shall find the record, and in v. 54 are the details to which I would direct your attention. First we read, "*Peter followed Him afar off.*" Should not Peter have been near the Master, following hard after Him, "cleaving" as it were "with purpose of heart unto the Lord"? (Acts xi. 23). But instead of this he

followed afar off. How often this is the case in the first stages of spiritual declension! There is no open denial, no actual turning away from Jesus, but there is a following Him afar off. Worldly things come between us and Him, at first a few things, then more, and still more, until gradually the Saviour is crowded out of sight, and almost entirely hid from our eyes. It is as when one follows a friend in a crowded thoroughfare. "He is there just before me," you say. "Yes, there he is. Ah! I've lost sight of him now! Stay, there he is again;" and so you go on, now getting a glimpse of your friend, now losing sight of him again, while the crowd gets thicker and thicker, and the obstacles more numerous, and it becomes doubtful whether you will ever catch him up or not. Alas! this is the way many disciples are following their Lord. Business, pleasure, family cares and other things partially or fitfully hide Him from our view. It is not as it once *was*, when "we took sweet counsel together," and "walked in company." My brother, is it so with thee? God help us to examine ourselves now on this point. "He followed him afar off."

We next read, "*He sat with the servants.*" Whose are these servants? They were the servants of those who were insulting Peter's Lord in an adjoining room. What business then had Peter to sit as "hail-fellow-well-met" with them? But this is the usual course of backsliding. Many who begin by following the Lord afar off, go on to associate with those who hate and

dishonour Him, or who at least are closely connected with those who do. "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers" is the inspired precept. He who is walking in close and joyous fellowship with Jesus sees a fitness in this precept, and seeks to apply it to all the relationships of life. Just because near his Lord, he cannot sit with the servants of His enemies. Knowing that "evil communications corrupt good manners," he will have no desire for such associations.

Another downward step is marked by the words "*And warmed himself at the fire.*" Twice the Holy Ghost sees fit to make this statement; for in v. 67 we again read of "Peter warming himself." Surely this is not without meaning. Just then they were spitting on the Saviour, bearing false witness against Him, buffeting and mocking Him; but Peter, forsooth, was cold, and must needs warm himself. An indication of his little interest in his Lord; the coldness of Peter's body but typifies the coldness that had crept into his heart. Those who have watched by the bedside of dying relatives, or who, in other circumstances, have passed through seasons of intense mental anguish, can testify that at such times they have had no thought of their personal comfort. The temperature around did not affect them. But Peter was in no such anguish, he therefore felt the cold, and "warmed himself at the fire." This is a sad picture of the lukewarm church in our own day. The Lord Jesus is still dishonoured, men still spit upon Him

and buffet Him by their rejection of Him as the Saviour, and still mock Him by mere formal allegiance; and where are His disciples? Warming themselves. Striving, for the most part, with all the energies of their nature, to enjoy themselves as much as possible, and to surround themselves with every luxury that can minister to their comfort and gratification. Little matters it to many professed believers that Jesus is still dishonoured by the rejection of countless thousands, or mocked by the sham religiousness of those who "say and do not." They are cold, and must warm themselves. Following afar off and sitting with the servants have paved the way for thinking more of self than of Christ.

Peter seems now to be in much the same position as Samson was when, shorn of his strength, "he wist not that the Lord had departed from him." There he sits by the fireside all unconscious of his danger. Satan in his desire to have him and sift him is stealthily approaching. The crisis comes. He is accused of being one of the followers of Jesus. Whence comes the accusation? From one of these very servants with whom he sat. How often a Christian's sorest temptations come as the result of his unfaithfulness, and as a consequence of the unwarrantable circumstances in which he has placed himself. He denied (v. 68). Presently another maid saw him, and said, "This is one of them." "And he denied it again" (v. 69). A little while after, they that stood by said again, "Surely thou art one of them;" but oh! horror,

"he began to curse and to swear, saying, "I know not this man of whom ye speak" (v. 71). To what fearful lengths believers sometimes go! Step by step he had gone back, and now he is seen openly departing from the living God for a season. Ah! brethren, "beware lest ye also," according to the word of this same Peter, "being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness" (2 Peter iii. 17).

We know that Samson had his strength renewed. Peter was turned again to the Lord, and wrote two valuable epistles to strengthen the brethren. With these restorations, however, we have not at present to do. Let these cases suffice for warnings, and "let us take heed lest there be in any of us an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God."

II. Let us notice *that this unconscious backsliding may exist in quarters where we least suspect it.* The word of the text is, "lest there be in any of you." "*Any of you,*" what a searching word! "Lord, is it I?" was the question asked by the disciples, as they sat round the supper table and heard the doleful announcement, "One of you shall betray me." No eye but that of the searcher of hearts could detect the faulty link in the apostolic chain. One can imagine this question prompted by a feeling of self-mistrust, "Is it I?" And one can suppose, also, that there may have been in it an indignant repudiation of the suspicion, "Is it I? is thy servant a dog, that he should do

this thing?" Brethren, the Lord would search us this morning by the solemn word "lest there be *in any of you* an evil heart of unbelief." May there be no self-confident repudiation of the suspicion. Rather may each bare his heart to the all-seeing One, saying in a spirit of self-mistrust, "Lord is it I?"

It is always dangerous to stay ourselves upon our strength, our knowledge, our experience; upon anything, in fact, but the sustaining grace of God supplied to us through faith from moment to moment. It is worthy of note, and has often been remarked, that in the accounts of backsliding furnished in Scripture, men seem to have failed just in those points of character where they were supposed to be strongest. Moses, the meekest of men, spake unadvisedly with his lips. Solomon, the wisest, became a very fool in his idolatries. David, the man after God's own heart, gave way to impurity. Abraham, father of the faithful, could not trust God to keep his wife, and must needs tell a lie to protect her. While Peter, the bold, trembled before a servant girl, and with oaths denied his Lord. Do not these things teach us that we should not glory in character or even in special grace conferred upon us, but "according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord"? (1 Cor. i. 31.) One sometimes hears Christians saying lightly of some form of evil, "I am in no danger because of that," or "This is not my besetting sin, I do not fear it;" but one never hears such language without a shudder. It has been said that he that is not

afraid of temptation is not afraid of sin. Oh, brethren, "let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. x. 12).

III. Let us consider, and very briefly, *the true safeguard against this unconscious declension.* Our text, as we saw at the outset, stands directly connected with v. 6, in which Christ is spoken of as "over His own house." This leads us back to the beginning of the chapter, where the Apostle urges us as "holy brethren" to "consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus." Brother, consider Him, this is the true safeguard against all backsliding. Considering Him aright, there will never be in us "an evil heart of unbelief," no "departing from the living God."

When reading this exhortation, one turns almost instinctively to the forty-eighth Psalm, where we read, "Walk about Zion, and go round about her; tell the towers thereof. Mark ye well her bulwarks, consider her palaces" (vv. 12, 13). As the devout Jew was encouraged to walk about the Holy City, and note her strength and beauty, so are we urged to consider the Lord Jesus in every aspect of His blessed character, offices, and work. Consider Him, brethren, as the condescending One, the mighty God, the babe in Bethlehem. Consider Him our holy exemplar, the fulfiller of the law of God. Consider Him, the crucified One, all-sufficient as "an offering and a sacrifice to God" on our behalf.

Consider Him, the risen One, the interceding High Priest, the coming Deliverer. Brethren, only with the eye of faith fixed on a full-orbed Christ, and a heart occupied in the consideration of Him, shall we be able to comply with the exhortation of the text, and "take heed lest there be in any of us an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God."

"Join all the glorious names
Of wisdom, love, and power,
That ever mortals knew,
That angels ever bore;
All are too mean to speak His worth,
Too mean to set my Saviour forth.

Jesus, my great High Priest,
Offered His blood, and died;
My guilty conscience seeks
No sacrifice beside;
His powerful blood did once atone,
And now it pleads before the throne.

My Saviour and my Lord,
My Conqueror and my King,
Thy sceptre and Thy sword,
Thy reigning grace I sing:
Thine is the power; behold, I sit
In willing bonds beneath Thy feet."



II.

BACKSLIDING IN HEART.

"The backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways."—PROV. xiv. 4.

THIS is the only passage where the word "backslider" occurs in our English Bible, and it is worthy of note that it is used in connexion with backsliding of the heart, and not of the life; as if God would have us know that all life backsliding flows from heart backsliding. Elsewhere Solomon says, "Keep thy heart with all diligence (or above all keeping), for out of it are the issues of life" (Prov. iv. 24). The heart is the citadel where the commander resides, and whence orders are issued to the men upon the ramparts. Woe to the beleaguered city if there be treachery or incapacity on the part of its commander!

Our subject for to-day is Backsliding in Heart. Let us in the first place *try to describe what this state is;* secondly, *point out some of the things that conduce to it;* and lastly, *shew how the backslider in heart is to be dealt with.*

I. *Let us try to describe what this backsliding in heart is.* In order to do this we must go back to the

time of conversion. To some this experience has been more consciously definite than to others. That is to say, while in every true child of God there has been a definite passing from death to life and from darkness to light, still, as far as the consciousness of the individual is concerned, there is an almost infinite variety of experience. The vast majority of believers have, however, both definitely and consciously passed from death to life, and this we call conversion. Now what was this experience? Let us try to set it forth in few words. You had been awakened from sleep, and roused from your deathlike lethargy by the voice of the Spirit of God, loud or still, sounding in your ears. You had seen your guilt and apprehended your danger. Guilt and danger combined gave you a sense of need. You were led to long for Jesus. Then, gradually like the dawning of the day, or suddenly like a flash of lightning at midnight, Jesus revealed Himself to you. You trusted Him, knew yourself saved, and rejoiced "with joy unspeakable and full of glory." These phases of experience may have extended over a long or a short time; they may all have been compressed into a few moments like the striking of the hour in a clock; but whether slow or rapid to the consciousness of the convert, the point arrived at is in each case the same. It is Jesus the Lord. Jesus, the sinner's substitute. Jesus, the once crucified, the now risen and glorified One. You trusted Him, believing that He "His own self bare our sins in His own body on the tree." But that was

not all. You loved Him. He in His altogether loveliness won your heart. Your best affections went out towards Him, and twined themselves round Him. Then as never before you could say,

> "My Jesus, I love Thee, I know Thou art mine;
> For Thee all the follies of sin I resign:
> My gracious Redeemer, my Saviour art Thou;
> If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus, 'tis now."

Brother, has this love continued? If not, there is backsliding in heart. God is the searcher of hearts. His eye scans the thoughts of every one in this assembly. How solemn the word of the Psalmist, "If we have forgotten the name of our God, or stretched out our hand to a strange god; shall not God search this out? for He knoweth the secrets of the heart" (Ps. xliv. 20, 21). Can we thus open our hearts to the Lord, saying as one of old, "Lord, Thou knowest all things; Thou knowest that I love Thee"? (John xxi. 17).

The Lord, in His epistle to the church of Ephesus, deals with the same question of heart backsliding. "I have somewhat against thee," He says, "because thou hast left thy first love" (Rev. ii. 4). The word "somewhat" is a supplement inserted by our translators, and perhaps rather an unfortunate one, as it conveys the thought of only a small thing being spoken of. The passage may be rendered thus, "Nevertheless I have against thee that thou hast left thy first love." It never can be a small matter in the eyes of the Lord,

that His redeemed people are in any measure declining in their love for Him. For this I think is the meaning of the expression here used. Applied originally to a church in its collective capacity, it has a general bearing on all individual Christian experience.

You will observe that this experience is compatible with great zeal and activity—"I know thy works;" with the maintenance of sound discipline—"thou canst not bear them which are evil;" with decided orthodoxy—"thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars;" and with firm endurance—"hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted." How sad to reflect that the machinery of a Christian Church or of an individual life may go on with its accustomed outward activity when love to the Lord Jesus is on the wane. Yes! they had left their first love. Ah! brethren, it is not the amount of work done, not even the zeal for orthodoxy displayed, but the measure of our love to the Lord Himself, that attests our true growth in grace.

But some say, "Yes, I have had the experience you speak of; there was a time when my heart glowed with the warmth of first love, but of course that has passed away." "Why of course?" I ask. It is like people saying as they do sometimes, "I have my doubts, of course." "Why of course?" I again ask. There is no "of course" about it. God does not expect us to doubt Him, neither does He expect us to decline

from our first love. Why then should we? I firmly believe that on the contrary He expects that the flame of our love to Jesus will burn more and more brightly as we go on in our Christian course. In this respect our love for Him is much like ordinary human love. You see that young man and maiden in the season of courtship; there is a strange buzz of emotion in their hearts: it is the time of first love. Now the peculiar emotions incidental to this season may pass away, never to return, but will the love itself decline? Ask the same couple after many years of happy wedded life. They have together passed through seasons of trial and difficulty, they have proved each other in a thousand ways, and they will tell you that the love they now bear each other is a truer, deeper, stronger thing by far than that ebullitionary feeling at the time of first love. Certain features of the love have passed away, but the love itself has deepened and strengthened. Far from declining, it is now an intelligent experimental love based upon knowledge of the worthiness of the object, and for this very reason far stronger than at its outset. So it is with the believer in Jesus. The strange new emotion of the first days of conversion passes away. Some have at conversion a bubbling up of feeling which may never be repeated on this side of eternity. But the believer who for long years has tried the faithfulness of his Lord, and who in storm as in sunshine has found Him ever true, loves Him with a deeper and a stronger, because a more intelligent, love than the

young convert only just brought to His feet. Is it so with us, my brethren? Are we thus growing in the knowledge of Christ, and so growing in our attachment to Him? or can He, as He looks upon us this morning, say, "I have against thee that thou hast left thy first love"? Brother, if this word is true of thee, thou art a backslider in heart.

This character is further described in the Lord's epistle to the church of Laodicea, where He says, "Thou art neither cold nor hot" (Rev. iii. 15). Lukewarmness is the condition here set forth. It is the state of one who has been warm, and who is not yet cold. He is cooling. Alas! how many of this class are found in our churches at the present day. They are set forth under various figures in different portions of Scripture. In Hosea vii. 8, we have Ephraim described as "a cake not turned." Ephraim is the typical backslider of the Old Testament. Like a cake, only one side of which has been browned by exposure to the fire, he has two sides to his character, and can present either side at pleasure, according to circumstances. Many in our day have a religious side, and can turn that, and a worldly side, and can turn that too, when occasion serves. They can go to a Bible-reading to-day, and enjoy it, and to a ball to-morrow, and enjoy that too. They have a side for the prayer-meeting and a side also for the theatre. Strange inconsistency! One is tempted to wish such people would be one thing or another, either cold or hot.

A passage which you will find in Zephaniah i. 5, brings the same class before us. We read there of "them that worship and that swear by the Lord, and that swear by Malcham" (or Moloch). They can be almost anything, according to the company they are in. When with Christians, they can be very pious; and when with worldlings, they can be—well not exactly impious, but they find it convenient just then to put their religion in their pocket. These are the "double-minded" of whom the apostle James speaks, "unstable in all their ways" (James i. 8). Like the ass in the fable, which perished of hunger between two bundles of hay, they are in danger of perishing because they cannot decide between Christ and the world. They are for ever quoting the unhealthy proverb, "When you are in Rome, do as Rome does." I would reply, "No, when you are in Rome, be a Protestant to the backbone." But I forgot, these people have no backbone; they are a kind of jelly-fish Christians.

This class is aptly typified by the Samaritans described in 2 Kings xvii. 33, where we read, "They feared the Lord, and served their own gods." Notice, fear for the Lord, service for their own gods. So with many who are backsliders in heart. Nominally, or perhaps one should say theoretically, they fear the Lord. They try to render Him some kind of homage. But the best of their energies, time, and talents are given to self. They *serve* their own gods.

These people are faint-hearted also. They cannot be relied on for faithful service or testimony in times

of severe conflict with the enemy. "The children of Ephraim, being armed, and carrying bows, turned back in the day of battle" (Ps. lxxviii. 9). There was a fitness in this; for, by the law of Israel, the faint-hearted were to retire when the battle was set in array (see Deut. xx. 8). Gideon, it will be remembered, acted on this principle (see Judges vii. 3). The backslider in heart is of little use when fighting has to be done. In times of earnest contention for the faith, in crises in the history of the Church universal, or of an individual company of believers, those who are "neither cold nor hot" find it convenient to slink to the rear.

We see, then, how the backslider in heart is described in the word of God. He has left his first love; he is lukewarm in spirit; mixed up with the world; double-minded, and faint-hearted. The Lord in His mercy preserve us from this sad condition.

II. Let us try to point out *some of the things that conduce to backsliding of heart.*

I would name first *neglect of the word of God.* The history of the Church, as well pointed out by Andrew Fuller in his treatise on backsliding, shews how in all ages spiritual declension has been closely connected with the neglect of God's word. During the long and wicked reign of Manasseh the book of the law of the Lord was lost, and when Josiah began to reign it was brought to light and read. During the darkness of the captivity the word of God seems to have been

again neglected; but Ezra the scribe restored it to its place, and read it in the hearing of the people. Just before our Lord's coming the Pharisees by their traditions had "made void the law of God;" but John the Baptist, Christ, and His apostles made known the truth as revealed in the Scriptures. The foundation of popery was laid in a disregard to the Bible, and the darkest days of the Church were those in which it was forbidden to the people; but the glorious Reformation was mainly effected by translating and circulating the word of God. As with the Church, so with individuals. The darkest days of our Christian experience are those in which the Bible is little read and its truths little meditated upon. Brethren, as the body cannot thrive without its necessary food, neither can the soul without the green pastures of the Holy Scriptures. Starve the body, and it very soon becomes weak and languishing; starve the soul, and it very soon loses its vigour and its tone. Most if not all backsliding of heart may be traced to the neglect of God's word. As a preventive I would fain urge much prayerful study of the Scripture. Read it. Read it often. Read it on your knees. And especially, read it all. Precept as well as promise, the historical as well as the experimental, the dim prophetic as well as the plain and practical. Read it all. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Tim. iii. 16). Let your soul roam at large through the length and breadth of the pastures God has provided,

that you, as a "man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works." Brethren, if we would be preserved from backsliding, let us "search the Scriptures."

Neglect of private prayer is another fertile source of backsliding of heart. We may say in regard to united worship, whether at our services or our prayer-meetings, "I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also" (1 Cor. xiv. 13). But how about our closets? Is there much personal dealing with God alone? Brother, dost thou "enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret"? (Matt. vi. 5.) One meets with all kinds of Christians now-a-days, but never with a Christian of power and practical usefulness, who is not a closet Christian, one accustomed to be much alone with God. One may easily pray more in public than in private, one may even pray more for the Lord's work than for one's own soul, and so get spiritually lean without being aware of it. Few if any backsliders but will trace their first declension to prayerlessness.

"Hear we the Shepherd's voice?
Pray, brethren, pray.
Would ye His heart rejoice?
Pray, brethren, pray.
Sin calls for ceaseless care,
Weakness needs the strong One near;
Long as ye tarry here,
Pray, brethren, pray."

Another thing that greatly tends to backsliding of

heart is *suffering sin to remain unconfessed.* It then lies on the conscience, defiling it, interrupting the soul's intercourse with God, and so impairing the health of the spiritual system. The conscience of a believer should be like a plate of polished steel on which no spot is suffered to remain. Sin, when detected, should be at once confessed and put away. But if only a small spot of sin remains unconfessed, the bright surface is thereby dimmed, and one spot begets many more, till the whole becomes obscured. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John i. 9). This is spoken for our encouragement. Let us, in the spirit of this word, ever be ready to say with David, "I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord" (Ps. xxxii. 5). It is not sin in general, but particular sins, that are spoken of in each of these passages. Let us beware, then, lest any, even of what we are apt to call small sins, are suffered to remain unconfessed, and so come between the soul and God.

I think we may say also that *want of Christian activity* is largely productive of spiritual lethargy and declension. The law laid down by the apostle was, "if any man would not work, neither should he eat" (2 Thess. iii. 10), and it appears to me that a principle is here embodied which is capable of wider application than to temporal things only. Is it not true that those who will not discharge their share of responsibility in the Church do not eat the spiritual food

provided for the workers? And why should they? Is it right that the drones should consume the honey laid up for the busy bees? Certainly not. In this sense it is true of many an idle Christian, that "slothfulness casteth into a deep sleep; and an idle soul shall suffer hunger" (Prov. xix. 15). Those to whom the question of the Lord is applicable, "Why stand ye here all the day idle?" have but little appetite for spiritual food. Their digestive powers are impaired by want of exercise, and consequently they seldom make much advance in divine things. Where they were ten years ago, there they are to-day. Like the door on its hinges, there is motion, but no progress. If this state of spiritual sloth is not backsliding, it is next thing to it, and many Christians can testify to its being both unhappy and unsatisfactory.

We must remember, too, that it is by use that our spiritual powers are developed and strengthened so as to be made capable of yet greater things. The smith who wields the heavy hammer finds the muscles of his arm enlarged, and the student who rightly uses his mental powers finds that they grow year by year; but the Christian who, amid the crying needs of the world around him, takes no decided part in Christian work soon finds his spiritual joys diminish and his spiritual strength decay.

One thing more I must name as tending to backsliding, and that is, *not publicly professing our love to Christ, and associating ourselves with a company of His people.* If "we know that we have passed from death

to life, because we love the brethren," why should we not seek to unite ourselves with those who are banded together in the name of the Lord Jesus? Of old "they that gladly received His word were baptized," and, being "added unto them, ... they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts ii. 41, 42). Why should it not be so now? But many believers stand alone. Failing to see that "union is strength," they think they can do without the Christian fellowship which God has instituted for His children. When you want to put out a fire, you rake the coals apart, and separate them one from another. Each then goes out by itself. Had they been kept together, each would have helped to keep the other warm, and the fire would still have burned. The devil understands this principle, and aims at keeping believers as far apart from each other as possible. He hopes to be able to overcome each separately, and knows full well that united we shall, with God's help, be too many for him. Think of this, my isolated brother.

Many other things might be named as conducing to backsliding, but time forbids. I have pointed out those that appear to me most important: neglect of Scripture, want of private prayer, unconfessed sin, idleness, and isolation. I must now pass to my third division, which I have already partly anticipated, and briefly notice—

III. *How to deal with the backslider in heart.*

His case is a difficult one. According to the text, "he is filled with his own ways."

It is not easy to awaken his interest. It is always difficult to reach his conscience. Argument does not succeed. You may demonstrate his declension, prove that he is not as he once was, make it plain that he is on the way to open backsliding, but he is not moved. Denunciation will not avail. You may denounce sin in the life, but backsliding only in heart it is difficult, almost impossible, to attack. Poor fellow! he is miserable enough it is true, but nothing does he so much resent as your venturing to say that he is not so happy as he once was. There is but one effectual way of dealing with him. He is cold: bring him to the fire, that heat may be imparted to him afresh. My brother, if you are in the condition I have been describing this morning, you must be brought to the unchangeable Christ, "the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever." Come to Him, cast yourself afresh upon Him, I implore you. Trust Him once more as of old, and all will yet be well.

I often think of the backslider as being like the traveller who fell among thieves, and was left half dead, having been stripped and wounded. The state of heart when spiritual declension has set in is not unlike the outward condition of that man. Our Lord Jesus Christ, like the good Samaritan, comes to the spot where he lies, and seeing him, has compassion on him. He pours into his wounded heart the oil and wine of His comfort and grace, and raising

him, provides for him, and even makes his future interests His care. Brother, Christ, your own Saviour, the One to whom you were so closely knit in "the love of thine espousals," is near you to-day. We read of Him, that "having loved His own that were in the world, He loved them unto the end" (John xiii. 1). Having loved you once "with an everlasting love," He loves you still. He bends over you in all the tenderness of His former affection, in which you once so much rejoiced. He would fain restore, and heal, and comfort you. What say you, brother? Will you trust Him afresh? Oh! look up to Him now. Let the hand of faith grasp His hand outstretched to succour you, and joy, eternal joy, will be your portion.

Unconverted hearer, a word with you ere I close. If it be sad to forsake Christ after having known Him, what must it be never to have trusted Him at all? We plead with you, look to Jesus on the cross, as He there bears the load of sin. Look to Him in heaven, as, raised by the power of God, He sits exalted on the throne. Trust Him, trust Him now, and salvation will be yours. The Lord grant it. Amen.

"Whom have we, Lord, but Thee,
Soul thirst to satisfy?
Thy wells are deep, Thy waters free,
All other springs are dry."

III.

LOVE OF THE WORLD.

"Turn, O backsliding children, saith the Lord; for I am married unto you."—JER. iii. 14.



EW appeals in Old Testament Scripture are so full of love and tenderness as those addressed to the backsliding people of God. That Israel was always wandering seems to be very near the truth, and that God was always pleading with her in most tender accents is equally true. Never do we see the fulness of God's heart so drawn out as when, contemplating His people's declension, He speaks in some such language as that now before us.

In considering this passage we may first point out *the ground of the appeal here made*, then shew *to whom the appeal is made*, and lastly notice *the appeal itself*.

I. *The ground of the appeal here made* is found in the expression, so full of affectionate earnestness, "I am married unto you." This was originally spoken to the children of Israel, and similar language is used in Isa. liv. 5, where we read, "Thy Maker is thine husband; the Lord of hosts is His name." The same thought in substance is brought before us in Eph. v. 23, where Christ as "the husband" is "the

Head of the Church;" and in Rev. xxi. 9, where the Church is called "the bride, the Lamb's wife."

We must bear in mind, however, that while there are many points of similarity between the position of Israel of old and the Church in this dispensation, there are also points of striking contrast. Israel stood *nationally* in a certain relation to God by covenant. To be born a member of the nation was therefore of great importance. As such, children were circumcised; as such, all Israel enjoyed many and great privileges; and as such, God addressed them in the language of the text, saying, "I am married unto you."

But there is now no nation in covenant relationship with God. There is now "neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free, but Christ is all and in all" (Col. iii. 11). It is no longer a question either of the nation to which a man belongs, or of his birth and lineage, but of his individual relation to God by his personal acceptance or rejection of Christ as a Saviour. I am afraid that this distinction is frequently lost sight of. Were it more clearly borne in mind, I venture to think that the unscriptural practice of baptizing infants, based for the most part on the circumcision of Jewish children, would cease to prevail; while the kindred error of national Churchism, for which there is no warrant in Scripture teaching concerning this dispensation, would also soon disappear. There would then be seen a truth which the all but universal

profession of Christianity in a land such as ours has greatly obscured; namely, that "the bride, the Lamb's wife," is composed of true believers, spiritual members, gathered out "of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues" (Rev. vii. 9).

For our present purpose, however, we may take the language of the text in its widest sense as applicable to ourselves in this day. It is an appeal to the backsliding children of God, to whom, as to true believers, the Lord says, "I am married unto you." It is important thus clearly to define the ground on which the appeal is made, that we may surely know the class to whom it is addressed, because in our day the term backslider has come to have rather a vague meaning. A man to have slidden back must at one time have been forward. He cannot have truly wandered from the Lord, unless he has personally known Him. To those, therefore, who are the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus is the appeal made, "Turn, O backsliding children, saith the Lord; for I am married unto you."

II. Let us in the second place consider *those to whom the appeal is addressed.* There were backsliders among the people of God in olden time, and I fear there are many such in the days in which we live. The fact of backsliding cannot be denied, it certainly should not be ignored. I would now ask you to turn with me to an illustration of backsliding afforded by Old Testament Scripture. I refer to the case of Lot.

We lose much sometimes by not more carefully considering the lives of those who have gone before us, remembering the word of the apostle, "These things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted" (1 Cor. x. 6). I call your attention to this instance in the earnest hope that we may gather valuable instruction as we proceed.

We find from a reference to Lot in 2 Pet. ii. 8, that he was *a true man of God*, notwithstanding his many failings. The expressions, "just Lot," and "that righteous man," (the same adjective being employed in each sentence in the original,) sufficiently mark him as one whom the Holy Ghost sets forth as a child of God.

It is worthy of note, also, that *he made a good start.* Most Christians do. To keep on is the difficulty. In Gen. xi. 31 we find Lot with Abraham the friend of God, and in xii. 4 we read, "So Abram departed, as the Lord said unto him; and Lot went with him." This was a memorable going forth, concerning which, more than two thousand years afterwards, an inspired apostle wrote, "By faith Abraham obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went" (Heb. xi. 8). Lot was in the company of the faithful, and bore testimony with these early saints to the great truth of trust in the living God.

The next note is one of discord; for we find that very soon there was *separation between brethren.* They prospered in worldly matters, but evidently prosperity and peace did not go hand in hand. Large posses-

sions necessitated large retinues. The masters could agree, but the servants could not. By reason therefore of the greatness of their possessions and the strifes of their servants "they could not dwell together" any longer (xiii. 1—9). Sad indeed it was that this separation should have been needed, or as Andrew Fuller well puts it, "It was a pity that those whom grace had united, should be parted by the lumber of this world."

We now have to consider *Lot's choice and its consequences*. Abraham seems to have acted most nobly in the matter. He said, "Is not the whole land before thee? Separate thyself, I pray thee, from me: if thou wilt take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if thou depart to the right hand, then I will go to the left." For forty centuries has this noble record stood, shewing to succeeding generations the example of unselfish love exhibited by this gracious servant of God. "And Lot lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere. Then Lot chose him all the plain of Jordan." Some men have the faculty of taking in the chief points of a landscape at a glance, some see in a moment what is most to their advantage. Such an one was Lot. His selfish instincts were all alive. Swiftly his eye travelled over the country, now to the right, now to the left; his choice was rapidly made; immediately he saw where best he might lead his flocks "beside the still waters," and make them "to lie down in green pastures." Ill requiting the kindly generosity

of Abraham, he thought only of himself, and chose that which would best advance his own interests.

Thus we see what it was that guided Lot's choice. He had once set forth under sealed orders to go to the land that the Lord would shew him. Did he ask now that God would make him to know the way wherein he should walk? Not so. Like Israel in the matter of the Gibeonites, he "asked not counsel at the mouth of the Lord" (Josh. ix. 14). Surely, brethren, we should never be content to go without the benefit of that Infinite Wisdom which delights to lead the people of God; for "when He putteth forth His own sheep, He goeth before them, and the sheep follow Him; for they know His voice" (John x. 4). Let our prayer ever be,

> "Choose Thou for me, my God,
> So shall I walk aright."

And then shall our ears hear a word behind us, saying, "This is the way, walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand, and when ye turn to the left" (Isa. xxx. 21).

Yet how many never think of asking God about their concerns, or even of seeking His glory in them. They choose a house before they know whether it is near a suitable place of worship. A healthy atmosphere is more thought of than healthful spiritual associations. A convenient market matters more than the place where the soul is to be fed. Or, they select a business, and consider only the prospect of gain which it offers, not how much time and oppor-

tunity it will give them for the service of God. They can trust God to save their souls, but they cannot trust Him to look after their business. Indeed, they expect that if they placed its control in His hands, they would soon end in bankruptcy. Is this so? Nay, "let God be true, but every man a liar;" and He says, "They that seek the Lord shall not want any good thing" (Ps. xxxiv. 10). "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matt. vi. 33). In Gen. xiii. 14—17, we see how God provided for a man who could trust Him to look out for him. All that Lot had sought to secure, and much more, was given to Abraham. There was a great difference in these two men. One sought to serve self, the other to serve God; "so they separated themselves the one from the other."

But this was not all. Lot had chosen his portion, *he had also chosen his associates*. Forthwith "he pitched his tent towards Sodom;" and the kind of place Sodom was is well described in the words which follow: "The men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the Lord exceedingly." Brethren, he who follows a certain course with a view only to his worldly advantage will find out before long that that advantage has cost him very dear. Some men pride themselves on doing very sharp things, and the world often applauds them as having a keen eye for the main chance. Now while it is true that Christianity does not consist in being soft, it is seldom that much solid good comes of such a course of action. Lot

did not make much by it in the long run, as we shall see. At present he is outside Sodom, but with his tent pitched towards it. Dangerous ground!

It is evident that he soon took another step; for in chap. xiv. 12 we read of "Lot, Abram's brother's son, *who dwelt in Sodom.*" He was now sharing the fortunes of its wicked inhabitants; for when the four kings did battle with the five, and defeated them, Lot was taken prisoner with the rest. We are not told why he went to dwell in the town, but we may conjecture. Was it because of a craving for society? Many backslide because of this. "We must be sociable; we must mix with others; we cannot be altogether alone." These thoughts are often in the hearts of Christians, and many are led thereby to dwell in the Sodom, towards which they had previously pitched their tent.

Or was it for the children's sake? "The boys must be educated," Lot would say to himself. "The girls must have eligible husbands," would be the motherly reflection of Lot's wife. "Yes," they would both agree, "we must take a house in Sodom; there's no help for it. It is true the people have rather a bad name, but probably they are not so black as they are painted; and certainly our children's interests must be attended to." Brethren, this is what Christian parents are saying every day, and by plausible arguments such as these many are slipping back into the world. As has been well said, "Many Christians who left the world for Christ's sake, return to it for the sake of their children."

Or was there the favourite excuse of the good influence they might exercise in Sodom? How often this is a snare! Associations with the world, and marriage with unbelievers, are excused on the plea of hoping to gain an influence for good. If God wants us to have influence, He can give it to us. But the people who argue thus know better than He, and wish to correct the mistake He made when He said, "Come out from among them, and be ye separate." Lot does not, however, appear to have exercised much influence after all. Certainly he failed to check the wickedness of his neighbours, and he did not even gain the confidence of his own sons-in-law.

Whatever was the motive, Lot became a townsman, and dwelt in the wicked city of Sodom. He soon took a prominent place among the citizens; for in chap. xix. 1 we find that "he sat in the gate." He was esteemed by the people, and they made him a magistrate.

It is worthy of note that in the midst of all this *God did not leave him alone.* The incident of war already referred to proves this. It must have been a sad trial to Lot to see the possessions on which his heart was so set carried off by the victors, and to find himself a prisoner in their hands; but was not this God's voice of remonstrance with Lot, because of the downward course he was now treading? When a Christian is found in great prosperity, and declining from the ways of God, one is thankful to see that he is not left undisturbed. But God's warnings are

sometimes unheeded, and it was so in the case of Lot.

Undoubtedly in the midst of all this there was *great exercise of conscience on the part of Lot.* He could not behold the sad scenes of Sodom's sin without such grief as a godly man must experience. "He was vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked;" and "dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds" (2 Pet. ii. 7, 8). At the same time it would appear that *his moral sense was blunted.* This is invariably the effect of familiarity with sin. No man who had not sunk by reason of his associations could ever have made the proposal which Lot made with reference to his daughters.

God's judgments were now about to descend, and Lot is *hastily drawn out of the city.* His very sons-in-law laughed at the warnings he uttered, and would not accompany him. He went out in haste, but not full-handed like the children of Israel when they went forth from Egypt. He went out, but he took nothing with him. What had he gained? Where were now his flocks and herds, the great possessions for which he had imperilled his life, aye, and his very soul? He goes out empty-handed indeed. Very soon he is wifeless; God's swift judgment came upon her. He himself is shortly afterwards found drunken and dishonoured. And his daughters—but we must draw the vail. Brethren, enough has been said to shew the fearful effects of backsliding. Oh that we may

be warned lest we too, thinking only of this world and the things of this world, wander from God in the blindness of backsliding! Ten thousand times in the history of the Church of God has the case of Lot been repeated. The Christian who seeks first his worldly advantage, and fails to see that his "chief end is to glorify God," is led step by step farther and still farther from the Most High, and at the last, "saved yet so as by fire," he has to be gathered out hastily by the hand of the Lord, "scarcely saved" in the end. May God of His infinite grace deliver us from such a course.

III. Let us now consider briefly, in the third place, the *appeal itself.* This appeal falls to be considered not alone, but in connection with its surroundings.

The context shews us *the spirit in which it is to be complied with.* Observe v. 13. "Only acknowledge thine iniquity." This is God's order. First must come confession. As the old proverb has it, "Sensibility to a fault is half-way to amendment." David, with a backslider's experience, says, "I acknowledged my sin unto Thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord; and Thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin" (Ps. xxxii. 5). Solomon, with a similiar knowledge of the ways of wanderers, says, "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper; but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy" (Prov. xxviii. 13). But as certainly as worldliness leads to wandering,

so pride garrisons the backslider's heart, and will not let him confess unto the Lord. "The wicked, through the pride of his countenance, will not seek after God" (Ps. x. 10). But the pleading expostulation is, "Only acknowledge thine iniquity." Am I to-day addressing a backslider—one whose sin has been brought home to him this morning? Brother, suffer me to entreat thee, "Only acknowledge thine iniquity." Deal with the Lord Himself, but make a clean breast of it. Tell Him "all the truth."

Then in the text itself *we have the appeal in one word*, "Turn." Short and emphatic, may it be carried to the heart in power, if any one here is wandering from the Lord. It is the cry of the Divine Husband to His wandering spouse—turn! the tender appeal of a loving parent to His backsliding children—turn! You remember the son of whom we read in the 15th chapter of Luke's Gospel, true type of a backslider; "When he came to himself, he said, I will arise and go to my father. And he arose, and came to his father." This was turning. His back had been towards his father, and his face towards the world and its guilty pleasures. But he turned. His face was now towards his father, and his back to the world. So turn, O backslider, I beseech you.

Observe further *the promise associated with this appeal.* It is in the 23rd verse, where we read, "I will heal your backslidings." This is a promise of Almighty power. I remember hearing a brother who, when asked who converted him, replied, "God con-

verted me, who else could do it?" So may we say of the healing of the backslider, "Who but God can do it?" Blessed be the name of the Almighty, He promises to do it.

Lastly, consider the language used by the backslider as setting forth *the One to whom he returns.* "Behold, we come unto Thee; for Thou art the Lord our God" (v. 22). Yes, the Lord *our* God. "We have wandered, it is true; most treacherously have we departed from Thee. But we acknowledge our iniquity. We come unto Thee. Thou art the Lord our God. We humbly claim Thee as ours. Thou art our Father, we are Thy children, all unworthy though we be. Thou art our Husband, married unto us by eternal covenant."

Beloved brother, let this be your language. Through Jesus, "the Mediator of the new covenant," respond to the appeal, and return to the Father, and joy and peace will be your portion evermore. The Lord grant it. Amen.

"As by the light of opening day
The stars are all concealed,
So earthly pleasures fade away
When Jesus is revealed.

Creatures no more divide my choice,
I bid them all depart;
His name, and love, and gracious voice,
Have fixed my roving heart.

Now, Lord, I would be Thine alone,
And wholly live to Thee;
But may I hope that Thou wilt own
A worthless worm like me?"

IV.

LUXURY AND EASE.

"Come, and let us return unto the Lord: for He hath torn, and He will heal us; He hath smitten, and He will bind us up."—HOSEA vi. 1.

WE have lately considered God's appeal to His ancient people, addressed to them at a time when they were wandering from Him. To-day our attention is directed to words which read like a response to that appeal. Four things strike one as being contained in the text.

First, *The fact of backsliding;* second, *God's dealing with the backslider;* third, *A glimmer of faith on the part of the backslider:* and last, *His goodly resolve.*

I. *The fact of backsliding.* The language of the resolution implies this. Had there been no wandering from the Lord, there would have been no need of a return to Him. Last Sunday we considered the case of Lot as illustrating backsliding through love of the world. To-day I would call your attention to passages in the histories of Solomon and David, as shewing how luxury and ease conduce to the same sad end.

Solomon was undoubtedly what would be called in this dispensation a child of God. In 2 Sam. xii. 25,

we see him named by a holy prophet "Jedidiah." This name means "beloved of the Lord," and accordingly, in Neh. xiii. 26, we are told that Solomon "was beloved of his God." We know also, from 1 Kings iii. 3, that "Solomon loved the Lord." Translated into New Testament language, this corresponds closely with 1 John iv. 19, "We love Him, because He first loved us." The position of Solomon is thus clearly defined.

In 1 Kings iii. 5—14, we have an account of the Lord's appearing to Solomon in a dream, one of the most remarkable events narrated in Scripture. God said, "Ask what I shall give thee," thus placing Himself, with His unlimited means, at his disposal. The Almighty went far beyond the Eastern monarch who said, "What is thy request? it shall be given thee to the half of the kingdom" (Esther v. 3). He whose kingdom is the universe put no such restriction on the asking of the youthful king. Notice the reply of Solomon. It reveals some interesting points of character. *He discerned the hand of God in his elevation.* He did not assume it as a matter of course that he should sit upon the throne, neither did he take it as given to him because he had any special fitness for the office. He acknowledged it was all of God. He said, "Thou hast shewed unto Thy servant my father great mercy, ... that Thou hast given him a son to sit on his throne, as it is this day" (v. 6). Observe also *his deep humility:* "I am but a little child. I know not how to go out or come in" (v. 7).

He evidently had a deep sense of his need of Divine guidance. He shewed also *great good sense in the request he made:* "Give therefore Thy servant an understanding heart to judge Thy people, that I may discern between good and bad; for who is able to judge this Thy so great a people?" (v. 9.) Strictly speaking, he did not ask anything for himself. He asked for that which would enable him to do the work God had given him to do, which would make him a blessing to others, and redound to the glory of God in the well-being of His people Israel. I am afraid many of us would, in similar circumstances, have preferred a far different request.

Solomon's petition pleased the Lord. "And God said unto him, Because thou hast asked this thing, and hast not asked for thyself long life; neither hast asked riches for thyself, nor hast asked the life of thine enemies; behold, I have done according to thy words: lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart" (v. 12). The Lord also gave him that which he asked not, both riches and honour, and, conditionally, length of days, thus proving that He is "able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think" (Eph. iii. 20). The principle of God's dealings with His people is the same in all ages. If we make God's glory our concern, He will richly care for us. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matt. vi. 33).

We must now pass over about twenty years of the

life of Solomon. Once more we find him favoured with a communication from the Most High. "The Lord appeared to Solomon a second time, as He had appeared to him at Gibeon" (1 Kings ix. 2). This was on the occasion of his completing the temple. The word spoken to him at this time was full of solemn warning. Formerly there was but one cautionary "if," now there are several. And the concluding words especially are significant, when read in the light of subsequent history. It would appear, however, that Solomon was still walking in the ways of God, and regularly maintaining His worship and service; for we read, "Three times in a year did Solomon offer burnt-offerings and peace-offerings upon the altar which he built unto the Lord."

I have dwelt thus long on the early history of Solomon, because light is thereby thrown upon his declension in after life. Twenty years had elapsed. Now twenty years are a considerable part of a man's life, and twenty years' faithful service and consistent walk should bring a man no small amount of Christian experience. One would naturally have said, "No fear of Solomon now, he has stood the test of time; he is experienced in Divine things, well established in grace." So we are apt to think. We tremble for the young convert, but think there is little danger of the twenty-year-old Christian's stumbling. But the history of Solomon shews us that no amount of experience is in itself a safeguard. Whether young or old in the faith, we need the preserving grace of

our God from moment to moment. How needful to abide in Jesus day by day, crying continually, "Hold up my goings in Thy paths, that my footsteps slip not" (Ps. xvii. 5).

It is in this same chapter that we find a strange "but," which sounds ominous. In v. 24 we read, "But Pharaoh's daughter came up out of the city of David unto her house which Solomon had built for her." What was Pharaoh's daughter to Solomon, or he to her? For an explanation we must turn back to chap. iii. 1, where we read, "And Solomon made affinity with Pharaoh king of Egypt, and took Pharaoh's daughter." God had said to His people concerning Egypt, "Ye shall henceforth return no more that way" (Deut. xvii. 16). Surely Solomon had transgressed this command. As for his marrying Pharaoh's daughter, it was like a Christian at the present day marrying an unconverted person in disobedience to the word, "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers" (2 Cor. vi. 14), unfortunately by no means a rare occurrence, and seldom without disastrous spiritual results. "The friendship of the world is enmity with God" (James iv. 4), and in Solomon's case this affinity with Pharaoh and marriage with his daughter are like the first links in a long chain of backsliding.

Is it not often the case that believers, even when apparently walking in the fear of the Lord, may be cherishing some secret sin or indulgence, which, like a seed concealed in the earth, finally germinates and

blossoms forth into open backsliding? It seems to have been so in Solomon's case at all events, as we shall see presently.

The tenth chapter gives us accounts of the very great splendour by which he was surrounded, but nothing about his worship of God. His prosperity is now at flood tide. But can he stand it? "It needs a steady hand to carry a full cup." Many a man who has stood fast in the days of his adversity has been carried off his feet by the advancing tide of prosperity. It appears to have been so with Solomon. In v. 24 we are told, "All the earth sought to Solomon, to hear his wisdom, which God had put in his heart." These visitors did not come empty-handed. Gold and silver, jewels and garments, armour and spices, horses and mules flowed in upon him from every hand. Whether these enriching gifts blinded the eyes of Solomon we know not, but certain it is that further downward steps were soon taken. "Solomon gathered together chariots and horsemen" (v. 26), and he "made silver to be in Jerusalem as stones" (v. 27), and he "had horses brought out of Egypt" (v. 28). Many will be ready to say, "But what was the harm?" Brethren, the harm was in disobeying God. Horses were expressly forbidden to the children of Israel, the distinct command being "not to return to Egypt, to the end he should multiply horses." So also was the accumulation of great wealth: "Neither shall he greatly multiply to himself silver and gold" (Deut. xvii. 16, 17). Now Solomon transgressed both of these commands.

Horses seem to have been forbidden to Israel, because they typified a ground of trust other than Jehovah. Hence the Psalmist says, "Some trust in chariots and some in horses: but we will remember the name of the Lord our God" (Ps. xx. 7). Also, "He (the Lord) delighteth not in the strength of the horse, He taketh not pleasure in the legs of a man. The Lord taketh pleasure in them that fear Him" (Ps. cxlvii. 10). God will not have His people trust in any created thing; only "in the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength" (Isa. xxvi. 4). But Solomon thought otherwise. Doubtless the nations round about had horses, and "must we not be in the fashion?" was perhaps said in his day as it is in ours. Many even among professing Christians must be in the fashion, even if they disobey God. They would in many things rather be like their neighbours than like Jesus. As to going down to Egypt, was it not his wife's former home, his father-in-law's kingdom? Ah! yes. "One must be civil to one's relations;" "family claims," etc., are pleas often urged in extenuation of unfaithfulness on the part of believers. All this shewed gradual declension on Solomon's part. So also did the accumulation of great wealth. But some will say, "Did not God give him riches?" Yes, undoubtedly, and still God had said the king was not "greatly to multiply to himself silver and gold." Similarly God gives to many men most advantageous positions in business. Money is made easily, and accumulates rapidly. Are they not to go on making? Is it not a gift of God? Brethren,

these are questions more easily asked than answered. God does not always guide us by detailed precept. To do so would be to treat us as machines rather than as men. He gives us in His word broad principles, and leaves upon us the responsibility of applying these principles to the details of every-day life. These principles must be applied in the light of the teaching of God's Spirit. In regard to the question now before us, whatever be the circumstances in which we are individually placed, we must never forget, that as kings in the following of Jesus the King of kings, we are exhorted—"lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth" (Matt. vi. 19).

With the opening of the next chapter we enter upon the saddest portion of Solomon's career. "But King Solomon loved many strange women," another transgression of a plain command of God (see Deut. vii. 3, 4), "and he had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart" (v. 3). God knows full well the danger of certain courses of action; and in this, as in every similar case, disobedience brought about the very result which He wished to prevent; "For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods" (v. 4), and then follows a list of the idolatries he practised. This is backsliding indeed! Jedidiah, the beloved of the Lord, endued with wisdom far beyond his fellows, made a fool of by women, and, to gratify his strange wives, bowing down to the *abomination* of the Ammonites!

But have these sad records no teaching for us? We may not be in danger of surrounding ourselves exactly as Solomon did, (although we must never forget that fleshly indulgence, even of the grossest kind, is a real danger to the Christian ever to be watched and warred against,) and yet there may be other dangers besetting us on every hand. Solomon's many wives are to us the types of worldly pleasures, which, in a thousand different forms, appeal to us and seek to draw away our hearts from the Lord. Like the wife of one's bosom, drawing out the warmest feelings of one's heart, so do some pleasures engage our affections. When this is the case, they gradually but surely turn away our hearts from the Lord, and almost before we are aware of it we are found indulging in some form of idolatry. The Christian who is self-indulgent, who makes the means entrusted to him by God minister to his love of luxury and desire for worldly pomp, is on the high road to idolatry. Not without deep meaning is the injunction framed by our Lord, "Take heed, and beware of covetousness" (Luke xii. 15), and the precept added by His inspired follower, "Mortify therefore covetousness, which is idolatry" (Col. iii. 5).

You will observe that God did not leave Solomon undisturbed in his idolatry and self-indulgence. The fiat, "Solomon is joined to idols, let him alone," had not gone forth. We shall see presently how He dealt with him, but in the meantime let us pass on to the consideration of our second example, viz., David.

We are all familiar with the history of David. He was a man after God's own heart. We know how God chose him to be king, how He prospered him in his contest with Goliath, delivered him once and again from the hand of Saul, and finally established him upon the throne. By the good hand of his God upon him the shepherd boy became a mighty monarch. That David became a backslider at one time of his life we also know, and it is to this I now seek to direct your attention.

We have the *record of his fall* in 2 Sam. xi. In the first verse of that chapter we read, "And it came to pass, after the year was expired, at the time when kings go forth to battle, that David sent Joab, and his servants, and all Israel; and they destroyed the children of Ammon, and besieged Rabbah. *But David tarried still at Jerusalem.*" This last sentence gives us the clue to the sad events which followed. David should have gone forth at the head of his army. There was the path of duty, but he "tarried still at Jerusalem." Christians who choose their own course, and cry not, "Teach me Thy way, O Lord" (Ps. lxxxvi. 11), soon get into trouble. While David's place was in the field, fighting the battles of the Lord, he was idling at home. Idleness is the parent of vice. As some one has said, "An idle man tempts the devil." Truly,

> "Satan finds some mischief still
> For idle hands to do."

When the Christian is commanded by his Lord, "Son,

go work to-day in my vineyard" (Matt. xxi. 28), and will not go, but stays at home at ease, by how many temptations he is assailed! Lurking lusts, encouraged by the quiet, creep out of their hiding-places, hold converse with his heart, and seek to drag him into all manner of sin. It was so with David as he "tarried still at Jerusalem." The details of his fall need not be dwelt upon. Suffice it to say that he looked with unholy eyes upon the wife of another. He fell before temptation, and committed gross sin, not only violating a command of God, but dishonouring himself as the head of God's chosen people. What followed? One would have thought that David, upbraided by his conscience, and smitten with remorse, would have cast himself before God, and cried in very bitterness of soul, "O my God, I have sinned grievously in this thing." Alas, no! his heart was "hardened through the deceitfulness of sin," and for the time being he was like one of those "who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness" (Eph. iv. 19). He set himself deliberately to commit further sin, in the hope of covering that already committed. This is almost invariably the case with the backslider. In a season of departure from God, with the conscience "seared with a hot iron" (1 Tim. iv. 2), the poor wanderer, like Adam, the first backslider, strays further and further in the vain hope of hiding himself from the searching glance of the Most High.

Let us notice what David did. He sent for the

husband of the woman whom he had so cruelly dishonoured, and sought to practise deceit upon him. Failing in this, because of the soldier-like faithfulness of Uriah, he descended so low as to make him drunk in the hope of gaining his end. And then, finding that this did not succeed, he planned and put into execution a cruel and cold-blooded murder, whereby not only Uriah, but also other valiant men, were slain. O brethren, to what terrible lengths will one step from the narrow way sometimes lead a man! Well might the prophet say, speaking in the name of Israel, "Our transgressions are multiplied before Thee" (Isa. lix. 12). One sin often becomes the parent of a progeny of iniquity. From idleness to impurity, from impurity to deceit, from deceit to murder. What awful steps in a downward course! David's history at this time is a terrible illustration of the truth taught by the apostle James, "Every man is tempted when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin; and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death" (James i. 14, 15). O my brother, beware of that idleness which was the beginning of David's downward career. Christian activity is not only well pleasing to the Lord, it is also safe for us.

After all this David seems to have had an easy conscience. With feigned resignation he said, on hearing of Uriah's death, "The sword devoureth one as well as another." After a decent period of mourning he sent for Bathsheba, and made her his wife, and

he would fain have settled down as if he had done no wrong. But the eye of the Almighty was upon him; so we read, "The things that David had done displeased the Lord" (v. 27). Accordingly, we are told in the next chapter of Nathan's mission to David, of the adroit parable by which he roused the virtuous indignation of the king, and of the terrible home-thrust, "Thou art the man" (v. 7). "The word of God is quick and powerful." This message was like a dagger plunged into the heart of David. He fell before it. Notice now what a change God had wrought. Listen to the reply, "I have sinned against the Lord." A word from the living God, sent home in the power of His Spirit, is that which alone can rouse the backslider, and bring him to a sense of his sin. If I am speaking to any one who has wandered from the Lord, and who is now cloaking his sin, I would fain say, My brother, the thing which you have done has displeased the Lord. His eye is upon you now. Singling you out in this assembly, He speaks to you personally at this moment, saying, "Thou art the man." Do not parry the thrust. Let the word, sharp though it be, reach your heart in the power of the Spirit, and may you be led to say, "I have sinned against the Lord."

"If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father Jesus Christ the righteous;" therefore, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John i. 9). This is God's way of peace for His

erring children, and on this principle He dealt with David. Frank confession brought speedy restoration; for Nathan replied, "The Lord also hath put away thy sin" (v. 13). That there was also deep soul exercise in David, and that he learned that it was "an evil thing and bitter to forsake the Lord," we see from the fifty-first Psalm, written at this time; but on this truth I do not at present dwell. David was forgiven, we know. David was restored. But the sad consequences of David's sin remained. Terrible crimes were afterwards committed in his own family, his favourite son rose in rebellion against him, and his last years were full of trouble. We often see it thus. The backslider's sin may be pardoned, and he himself restored, while he may have to bear "a something" which will only be laid down with his life. Some people say that a broken limb well set is stronger than one that has never been broken. I do not believe it. I certainly would advise my readers never to try the experiment.

II. Having considered these illustrative cases, we must return to the text, and briefly notice in the second place, *God's dealings with the backslider.* This is brought before us in the words, "He hath torn—He hath smitten." David had cause to say this, as we have just seen; so also had Solomon. Many rebellions took place in the reign of the latter, all of which shew that God in mercy did not leave him alone, but sought to bring him back to Himself. That He suc-

ceeded in this is shewn, we believe, in the Book of Ecclesiastes, written in the last years of Solomon's reign.

It must ever be borne in mind that it is in mercy, and not in wrath, that God deals with His backsliding children. "He doth not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men" (Lam. iii. 33). Punishment has for its object, it is true, the vindication of the authority of God as the moral Ruler. It is judicial as well as remedial. Its chief purpose, however, when visited upon the backslider, would seem to be his restoration. It is, in fact, "for our profit, that we might be partakers of His holiness" (Heb. xii. 10), a proof to us that "the Lord will not cast off for ever" (Lam. iii. 31). How important therefore to learn the lesson which God would teach us, so as not to need repeated chastisement at His hand.* The words of the apostle are full of meaning: "Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous; nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them that are exercised thereby" (Heb. xii. 11). Medicine does harm, and not good, if the system is not affected by it, and so chastisement hardens if it does not soften. Only when the chastened one is "exercised thereby," is profit received. One should be

* The reader is asked to note the record of God's dealings with backsliding Israel, as brought before us in Amos iv. Stroke after stroke was needed, and after each chastisement come the words, like the booming of a bell in the gloom of a November fog, "Yet they have not returned unto me" (v. 6, 8—11).

thankful if one is not left alone, therefore; and however sore the stroke may be, we must not seek to turn the rod from us. The cry of Ephraim is suitable to every chastened backslider: "Turn thou me, and I shall be turned; for Thou art the Lord my God" (Jer. xxxi. 18). Brethren, does not all backsliding consist in the heart's being occupied with something other than Christ Jesus? A very small object placed on the eye will obscure the sun's light, and even small things cherished in the heart obscure our spiritual vision, so that we see not our blessed Redeemer as we once did. That which comes between the soul and Jesus *must* be taken away in order to our restoration. Hence God's dealings with us, the smitings of which we read in our text, and the lacerations of heart implied in the word "He hath torn." Happy our case, brethren, if, "exercised thereby," we consider our ways, and turn again unto the Lord.

III. But the text also presents us with the thought of *a glimmer of faith on the part of the backslider.* "He will heal us—He will bind us up." Is it not so? As the seeds found in the mummy cases of Egypt still contain, after 3000 years, the principle of life, so in the heart of the backslider there lies hidden the germ of a God-given faith. It is not in "lively exercise" it is true; if it were, he would be no backslider; but it is there, and ever and anon, even in the darkest hour, a faint glimmer of light arises in the recesses of the heart. When all hope seems to have fled, and

when a feeling akin to despair has settled on the soul, the faintest whisper is heard. Feebly and slowly it articulates the words of the text, "He will heal—He will bind up." True, it is but a weakly plant, needing much the light of God's truth and the dew of His Spirit to nourish and invigorate it; a though-He-slay-me-yet-will-I-trust-Him kind of feeling. But the loving words of Jesus fall like gentle "rain upon the mown grass" of a heart with this experience. "A bruised reed He shall not break, and smoking flax He shall not quench, till He send forth judgment unto victory" (Matt. xii. 20).

IV. This it is which leads to what calls for our attention in the last place; viz., *the goodly resolve*, "*Come, and let us return unto the Lord.*" Note that it is to the Lord we are to return. Some seek to heal their backslidings without dealing with God Himself. They return to ordinances, to associations, to work, but not to the Lord. It is written of some, "They return, but not to the Most High" (Hosea vii. 16). Brethren, this will not do. The sin may be covered, but not put away. The goodly resolve here recorded is, "Come, and let us return *unto the Lord.*"

And how are we to return? There is but one authoritative voice to us in this matter; it is the voice of Him who says, "I am the way; no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John xiv. 6). Backsliders are certainly included in this comprehensive word. Through Jesus, the once crucified,

the now risen and exalted One, and through Him alone, can we return unto the Most High.

"Come, let us to the Lord our God
With contrite hearts return;
Our God is gracious, nor will leave
The desolate to mourn."

And let every heart say, Amen.

V.

BITTER EXPERIENCE.

"And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat"—LUKE xv. 16.

HAVING already considered backsliding under various aspects, I purpose this morning calling your attention especially to the *experience* of the backslider.

Let it not be supposed that in choosing this text I have any desire to make an exclusive application of the parable of the Prodigal Son to the case of a backslider. Like most of the parables of our Lord, it is chiefly designed to set forth one truth, although others may also be introduced incidentally. Here we are taught the wondrous love of God, and His abundant willingness to welcome those returning to Him, however far they may have wandered in sin and folly. Of course this truth is capable of application to a variety of cases. In this parable, however, our Lord in graphic words sketches a portrait which strikingly resembles the backslider. It is the description of a son who has wandered from the father's roof, the member of a family who has forsaken the happy home circle; hence the fitness, as it seems to me, of these words as a subject for meditation on the present occasion.

In considering the subject thus brought before us, we shall first notice *some of the steps which led to the experience here set forth*, and then *try to describe the experience itself.*

I. It is worthy of note that in the description given us in this parable there are certain indications of character which go far to explain the fall of this young man.

In the first place, *he was evidently impatient of control.* That he had considerable strength of will and a great amount of self-reliance we cannot well doubt. He was a man who had a mind of his own, and he was determined to shew it. Old-fashioned notions might do for old-fashioned folks, but as for him he had his own ideas about things. He did not want to be in leading strings all his days. No, he meant to be his own master. Ah! dear friends, we may have too much strength of purpose and too much independence of character. Many Christians, and especially young Christians, are apt to be impatient of Divine control. "We must not be too strict, we must not be so very particular," are expressions often heard in these days; and when direct commands in Scripture are appealed to, the reply is, "Yes, there is that word to be sure, but we cannot follow out Scripture in every point. Besides, am I not a child of God? May I not enjoy my liberty?" You may think I am putting the case rather strongly, but I am persuaded that these thoughts are in the hearts, if these words

are not actually on the lips, of many professed believers. One may well tremble when one hears such talk; for liberty, when spoken of or thought of thus, soon degenerates into license. One cannot but look upon want of subjection to the word of God as a fertile source of spiritual declension. Sentiment and expediency, both often tacked on to a professed experience of a somewhat high-flown character, or zeal of an extraordinary sort, are frequently substituted for "Thus saith the Lord," all indicating that impatience of Divine control from which so much backsliding results.

We may say further, that *he was tired of home life, and longed for change.* Like many young men, he found it dull to be always in the same circle, and always seeing the same faces. There was little to interest, nothing new, and he longed for variety. The believer, when his heart grows cold towards the Lord Jesus, finds that the round of Christian life becomes irksome to him. His work for the Master no longer interests him. His very associations, once so pleasant, lose their charm. When the heart is set on wandering, nothing is right. Brethren, this craving for change is a dangerous feeling to cultivate. It may in one sense have its good points; but if allowed to develop, it will certainly bring us into trouble. There may be some danger of settling down into "groove" work, but there is also a danger of "chasing the will o' the wisp of some new thing." If liable to err by falling into routine on the one hand, let us not shut our eyes to the opposite error of Athenianism. Do not forget that

the patient plodding Christian is the one who does best in the long run. "Jack of all trades and master of none" is a proverb which has its application in the church as well as in the world. Let us beware of being unduly "given to change."

Notice also, *he looked with longing eyes on fancied pleasures beyond the home circle.* He heard from others, doubtless, of the fine things in the world outside, and he longed to be free to roam at will amidst forbidden joys. The Christian too often listens to the voice of the tempter. Words of worldlings fall upon his ears again and again, until at last he pictures to himself a bright world of bliss beyond. Soon he gloats in imagination over the "pleasures of sin," and, almost without knowing it, he longs to gratify his desires. Having lost his relish for the things of God, and his keen enjoyment of communion with Christ, he longs for something to fill the void within, and turns greedily to the world outside to satisfy his craving. He is now on the brink of the precipice.

With these feelings, having obtained his portion, *he took his journey into a far country.* What the heart plans, the feet soon carry into execution. The Christian who becomes impatient of God's control, who tires of Christian life, and looks with longing eyes on the pleasures of sin, soon finds himself in a far country, far off from the living God.

There was now *a brief period of riotous enjoyment*, but it was soon over, and times of trouble came apace. At first the backslider thoroughly enjoys himself.

Freed from what he considers "trammels," he plunges into the vortex with avidity, and sometimes goes to the very furthest lengths in sin. This season of tumultuous enjoyment is not of long duration, however. A sense of unreality forces itself upon him. Conscience is found to be only asleep, not dead. Remorse begins to be felt. A famine sets in. Sound food is craved for, something that will satisfy the soul's longings. He begins to be in want.

We see also that this young man *came under the power of another, and was dragged through the mire as a consequence of sin.* "He went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine." A terrible position this for the son of a rich man, a most degrading occupation for one of the children of Israel. The consequences of misconduct are often similar in our day, and many a backslider is brought into a like situation. Glad to serve sin for a bare subsistence, he is made to do work that his soul loathes. "The way of transgressors is hard."

II. This brings us to the consideration of our second point; viz., *the experience set forth in the text.*

In regard to this experience several things may be noted. I would have you observe that there was *a hunger that nothing could satisfy.* This feeling is described by the expression, "He would fain have filled his belly," which is exactly similar to the "desiring to be fed" of Lazarus in chap. xvi. 21. The thought is that of great need and intense longing. But why, it may

be asked, did he not partake of the husks which the swine did eat? Surely this citizen would not have grudged them to the young man. The reason is, they were swine's food, and not man's. They could not therefore satisfy his cravings. Fit picture this of the backslider's sad experience. The pleasures of sin are all round him. Thousands of worldlings are satisfied up to their measure with that on which they feed. But the Christian, however far he may have wandered, is a Christian still. Though he would fain fill his empty and aching heart with the things which satisfy those around him, he cannot, and "I perish with hunger," is his miserable utterance. O brother, I appeal to your heart's experience this day. Once you fed on "the finest of the wheat." As you sat at your Father's board, your soul was "satisfied as with marrow and fatness," and your mouth praised Him with joyful lips (Ps. lxiii. 5); "wine on the lees well refined" was your beverage. Your palate has been spoiled for a thorough enjoyment of the world. Before God I appeal to you, backslider, is it not so? The smile you wear is feigned, not real. Your laughter, though loud, is hollow. By rounds of occupation you may perchance forget your sorrow, but the hunger is there nevertheless. In the calmness of this moment you are terribly conscious of it. Is it not so? I again ask. The giddy pleasures you so madly follow cannot satisfy your cravings. Amidst them all you "perish with hunger." Oh! I beseech you, deal with God about this terrible soul-hunger. Seek not to cloak

it from Him; you cannot, if you would. Let your language this moment be, "I will arise and go to my Father."

There was also *a vivid recollection of the past.* In the Lord's address to the church of Ephesus we have the words, "Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen" (Rev. ii. 5). Memory was used to bring this man to himself. He thought of his happy home-life before he began to wander. Scenes of days long gone by came floating back on the waves of his remembrance. Solitary and cast down, he heard again the hum of well-known voices; cold and hungry, he in imagination sat once more at his father's well-spread board. I have read that Bruce the traveller, when all alone in the wilds of Abyssinia, burst into tears as he heard the croaking of the frogs in a lake on the edge of which he had lain down to rest. Memories of the past were roused by these unmusical notes. He wept as he thought of his happy home in far off Scotland, where the same sounds had often fallen upon his ears. Small things will sometimes wake our slumbering memories. O brother, if you have got into the "far country," may God make you remember the happy experience of the past, may you come to yourself, and may it be seen "that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance" (Rom. ii. 4).

It would appear, moreover, that there was *a consciousness of what he had lost by his folly.* A man who has seen better days is generally discontented;

and this prodigal, as he looked at his rags, and felt the gnawings of hunger, and thought of his menial employment, must have bitterly deplored his loss.

It is said that at the coronation of one of our Georges, a stranger with his face partially muffled was seen to watch the ceremony with deep interest. Afterwards he was known to be the heir of the exiled house of Stuart. What must have been the feelings of that man as he saw the pomp and pageantry connected with the elevation of another to the throne of England! Bitterly must he have reflected on the loss he had sustained. The experience of the backslider is a similar one. Every happy Christian face and every joyous note of Christian praise testifies to him of what he has lost, and aggravates the bitterness of soul which he experiences. Ah! brother, full well do you know that I speak the truth. Many a time does another's joy deepen the consciousness of your own terrible loss. We can even thank God that it is so, and that the happy testimony of the living Church of God joins with the invitations of Scripture in pleading for your return to the Father.

We can well understand, too, that he must have been *the subject of bitter self-reproach.* Whom could he blame but himself, now that he saw the results of his folly, and experienced the bitterness of his situation? To backsliding Israel was the word addressed, "O Israel, thou hast destroyed thyself" (Hos. xiii. 9), and similar reproaches must have been dictated by the *conscience* of this young man. Few things are more

terrible than the lashings of the conscience of a backslider. In Jer. ii. 19 we read, "Thine own wickedness shall correct thee, and thy backslidings shall reprove thee." This is true in the experience of man. Like the recoil of the cannon, which often wounds the man who discharges it, or like the boomerang, which returns and smites the man who throws it, sins come back on the head of him who commits them, and often with grievous result. As with the wretched victim of delirium tremens the air around seems filled with devils, so is it in the case of the backslider; the sins of the past, sins against much light and much grace, come back to his memory, to taunt and torment him. In many other ways, on which I cannot now enlarge, the backslidings of a Christian reprove him. Let the consciences of backsliders speak, and they will amply verify what I now assert.

Taking it for all in all, *he was passing through a most miserable experience.* In the passage referred to last, the word is added, "Know, therefore, and see, that it is an evil thing and bitter, that thou hast forsaken the Lord thy God, and that my fear is not in thee, saith the Lord God of hosts." The young man in the parable is an illustration of this, and the experience of thousands of backsliders fully endorses the statement. I say it deliberately, I do not believe that any experience this side of hell can be more truly bitter than that of an awakened backslider. Whether it be the consequences of his sins or the inward remorse to

which he is subject; the remembrance of former joys, or the consciousness of what he has put away from him in his folly; no experience can compare with it. If there are backsliders before me now, with whom the Spirit of God is dealing, I appeal to their consciences without fear, not doubting that they will assent to what I say. I fear that many thousands can testify to the sad truth, that bitter is the experience of the backslider.

All this experience seems summed up in one word in the verse succeeding our text of to-day: "He came to himself." It is worthy of notice that there are three crises in the history of the prodigal.

"He began to be in want."

"He came to himself."

"He arose, and came to his father."

My dear hearer, if you have wandered from God, if you have passed through the experience, *beginning to be in want;* if God has brought you to the second point, and you have *come to yourself;* may God of His infinite mercy so deal with you that this very day you may *arise and come to your Father.* The restoration of the backslider will occupy our attention on another occasion, but let me in the meantime remind you that the father ran to meet the prodigal. Jesus says, "Him that cometh to me I will in nowise cast out." Both express the warm welcome that awaits the return of the wanderer to the fold. Remember, Christ, and Christ alone, is the way of access. Come through Him. Plead His all-sufficiency, and assuredly

you will be welcomed back to the bosom of the Father. The Lord grant it.

"I am cast out—I find no place,
No hearing at the throne of grace;
'Come, Lord—O come!' I cry alway,
I pour my heart out night and day,
Yet never until now have won
The answer—'Here am I, my son.'

O dull of heart! enclosed doth lie
In each 'Come, Lord!' a 'Here am I:'
Thy love, thy longing, are not thine—
Reflections of a love divine:
Thy very prayer to thee was given,
Itself a messenger from heaven."



VI.

HAPPY RESTORATION.

"He restoreth my soul."—PSALM xxiii. 3.

RESTORATION, like conversion, is the work of God. Who can convert a sinner? God only. Who can restore a backslider? The Almighty alone. There is a certain similarity between the restoration of a backslider and the conversion of a sinner. Both must be brought to Christ, they must alike trust Him, and Him only. But there is also a great difference. The sinner has to be awakened and brought to Christ for the first time. The backslider has to be drawn a second time to Him from whom he has wandered. To man both works are alike impossible; but to Him in whose hand are the hearts of all men, both are equally easy.

In considering the subject of restoration, I purpose calling your attention first *to the means God employs to bring a backslider to repentance;* secondly, *to the way of his return;* and lastly, *to his joyous experience when restored.*

I. Let us notice *the means God employs to bring the backslider to repentance.* Any one who has tried to deal with a backslider knows how difficult it is

to awaken him to anything like a proper interest in Divine things. There may be a mere formal assent to the truths stated, your remonstrance may be received with perfect indifference, the warmest entreaties may be treated with scorn, or the one you seek to reach may be found in a state of almost hopeless despair. In this sense "it is impossible to renew them again unto repentance." But it is a comfort to know that "the things that are impossible with men are possible with God," and by various means God brings His wandering children to a sense of their condition.

In the first place, *He often uses memory to this end.* We have lately seen how in the case of the prodigal son he remembered how many hired servants his father had, and so came to himself. In a somewhat different sense we see memory made use of in the case of Peter; for in Matt. xxvi. 75, we read, "And Peter remembered the word of Jesus." Now what was the word which he remembered? It was a word of solemn warning, but it was also a word of precious promise. The warning was, "Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice." The promise was, "I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not" (Luke xxii. 32). The remembrance of the warning brought vividly before him the sin he had just committed, and the recollection of the promise melted his heart at the thought of the loving Saviour whom he had so greatly dishonoured.

Similarly God often brings to our mind, by His Spirit's power, words of warning and remonstrance,

that we may clearly see the position into which our wandering has brought us. A pedestrian going through an unknown country is told in his guide-book not to turn at a certain point, because he will then come to a dangerous morass. But the night is dark, and the right path is difficult to find. On he wanders, unconscious of having made any mistake, till he finds the ground giving way under his feet. Suddenly he remembers the warning, and realizes his danger. In like manner the backslider unconsciously wanders farther and farther from the right path, till, by the Spirit's power, some warning word of God is brought to his recollection, and he then for the first time sees his true position.

The promises and assurances of God's word serve a like purpose. All-important, therefore, to bring the backslider to the Scriptures of truth. Exhortations such as, "Turn, O backsliding children, for I am married unto you" (Jer. iii. 14), or promises such as, "I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely" (Hos. xiv. 4), abound in the word of God, and are, when blessed of the Spirit, suited to melt the hardest heart. "Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning" (Rom. xv. 4), and we may say, using God's own illustration, that the Scripture is like an armoury from which the Holy Ghost chooses weapons according to His will, that He may therewith vanquish the backslider, and bring him to repentance.

We may say further, that God seeks to deal with

the backslider *by the exhibition of Himself.* He makes Himself known to us as *the unchangeable One.* "I am the Lord, I change not, therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed" (Mal. iii. 6), spoken originally to His ancient people, but true in principle of all the children of God in all dispensations. This word is not contradicted, but rather endorsed, by Isaiah lix. 1, 2, so often quoted, or rather *mis*quoted by half of the statement being omitted: "The Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither is His ear heavy, that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you, that He will not hear." The sun shines always, even on a dull November day; and if we do not always see him, and rejoice in his warmth, it is because something comes between us and him. It is thus with the backslider and his God. God changes not, and He is ever presenting Himself in His unchangeableness, that He may lead him to repentance.

God also, and to the same end, *makes known His faithfulness.* "God is faithful," says the apostle, "by whom ye were called into the fellowship of His Son" (1 Cor. i. 9). Ever righteous in His dealings with sin, He is never unfaithful to His covenant, "ordered in all things, and sure." If we turn to Isa. xlix. 15, we shall see how warmly God repudiates the bare thought of unfaithfulness in regard to His ancient people. In the fourteenth verse we read, "Zion said, The Lord hath forsaken me, and my Lord hath for-

gotten me," and in the next verse we have the indignant reply, "Can a woman forsake her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the fruit of her womb? Yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands, and thy walls are continually before me." O backslider, if your heart is still hard, let the thought of God's faithfulness soften you, and bring you to His feet.

God also reveals Himself in Christ as *full of tenderness and compassion.* In the parable of the prodigal son we see how the father, "when he was yet a great way off, saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him." True picture of the attitude of God in Christ towards the returning wanderer. In spite of the poverty and rags, the father's eye was swift to recognise his boy; and often, while to human eyes there is only hardness and indifference, our Father in heaven sees the returning attitude of the backslider's heart, and hastens in love to meet him. "Him that cometh to me," says the Lord, "I will in nowise cast out" (John vi. 37); that is, him that is coming. He may be yet a great way off; he may come with halting steps; but if is face is only Godward, God in Christ sees him, and will in nowise cast out. Weary wanderer, let this encourage you. As you listen, may the word be carried to your heart, and may it lead you back to the Lord.

Was it not the tenderness of God in Christ that really broke Peter down? In Luke xxii. 61, we read,

"And the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter." That look broke poor Peter's heart; it was then the word came to his remembrance, and "he went out, and wept bitterly." In like manner God in Christ looks on any wanderer here this morning. May His face be seen, and may you, dear hearer, be thereby led to repentance.

II. But we must pass on to consider, in the second place, *the way of the backslider's return.* And first of all I would have you notice it is *a way of humility.* Peter "wept bitterly." His tears but feebly expressed the anguish of his soul because of his sin. There was in him a true sense of sin, as there must be in every backslider on his restoration. I dare not prescribe the quantity, or dictate as to its precise quality, but a true sense of sin there certainly must be. The scripture testimony to this truth is abundant. We read, "The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart, and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit" (Ps. xxxiv. 18). Also, "Thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose Name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones" (Isa. lvii. 15). And, "To this man will I look, even to him that is poor, and of a contrite spirit, and that trembleth at my word" (Isa. lxvi. 2). Both these verses seem to me to describe the experience of Peter; and in a similar frame of mind must the backslider be in returning to the Lord.

I would say, however, Do not try to work yourself into a certain state of feeling, or, as an old writer has said, "Do not go on spinning repentance, as it were, out of your own bowels, bringing it with you to Christ, instead of coming to Him by faith to receive it from Him." Of the exact nature of your feelings you never can be a proper judge. But this I would urge, look your sin steadily in the face; judge it as in the presence of God; consider it in the light of His warnings and promises, His exhibition of Himself, and His former dealings with you. Ask that you may see it as He sees it, and in all self-loathing and self-renunciation cast yourself afresh at the feet of Jesus.

The way of the backslider's return is also a *way of prayer*. In Hosea xiv. 2, we read, "Take with you words, and turn unto the Lord; say unto Him, Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously." True, God knows all our wants, but He wills that we should make them known unto Him. "Thus saith the Lord God, I will yet for this be enquired of by the house of Israel" (Ezek. xxxvi. 37). We must not only see our need, we must also ask. Sin must be spread out before the Lord in true and humble confession. All must be acknowledged; nothing whatever must be kept back. "Take away *all* iniquity" is the word. It is also *an appeal to God as the God of grace*, a casting ourselves upon the clemency of the Sovereign, "Receive us graciously." Here is no claim in right, but a suppliant's plea for mercy; no haughty demand, but a beggar's humble cry.

Closely connected with this prayer, so as almost to form a part of it, is *a distinct renunciation of evil.* "Asshur (or Assyria) shall not save us: we will not ride upon horses" (v. 3). The false gods and the customs of the nations round about had ensnared them, but all these things were now renounced. Many things have in like manner crept into the backslider's heart. They must be put away. All must be distinctly surrendered as we return to the Lord. There was also *a forsaking of self.* "Neither will we say any more to the works of our hands, Ye are our gods." "Any more," then they had done so heretofore; and so have you, my backsliding brother. Self, as well as sin, has had dominion over you. Self, as well as sin, must be renounced in turning once more to the Lord. This return must further be *whole-hearted and unreserved.* In Jer. iii. 10 we read, "Judah hath not turned unto me with her whole heart, but feignedly, saith the Lord." Half-heartedness in turning to the Lord is an awful thing. "My son, give me thine heart," is the appeal of the Father to His child; and "Blessed are they that seek Him with the whole heart" (Ps. cxix.).

Notice also, that *praise must be mingled with prayer.* "So will we give Thee the calves (or fruit) of our lips." Praise must be offered to Him to whom prayer is made. Most suitably do we "praise God from whom all blessings flow." Therefore "in everything by prayer and supplication *with thanksgiving* let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God shall keep your hearts and minds by Christ Jesus" (Phil. iv.).

I would have you remark further, in regard to the way of the backslider's return, that it must be *the way of a child, and not the way of a stranger.* If this be not borne in mind, God is likely to be dishonoured. It is true there must in every case be a coming afresh to the Lord Jesus, and anew the casting of one's self on Him, the ever all-sufficient One. But there can be no second regeneration; no re-conversion, in the sense in which the word conversion is ordinarily used; no being again washed as at the first, though there must be afresh the application of the blood in its sin-cleansing efficacy (see John xiii. 10).* To judge otherwise would be to suppose that the previous work of grace had been undone, that the creature had been able to make void the operation of the Creator. The child in the course of its rambles may fall into a pool or become entangled in the briars; it may return weeping to its parents with soiled and tattered garments, but still it returns as a child, and not that it may be made a child, as though it never had been one. Just so the backslider, far though he may have

* It may be well to remind the reader that John xiii. presents us with the truth, not of the washing away the sins of our unconverted state, but of the cleansing from daily defilement contracted in our walk through this world. In v. 10, the expression, "He that is washed" (or bathed), refers to the washing in conversion. Such an one needs not in this sense to be washed again; "he needeth not save to wash his feet." On this passage the late Dean Alford remarks, "Reference appears to be made to the fact that one who has bathed, after he has reached his home, needs not entire washing, but only to have his feet washed from the *dust* of the way."

wandered, and much as he may have dishonoured the Father's name, must come as a child to seek once more a child's portion and privilege. The prodigal surely mistook altogether the Father's heart when he thought of saying, "Make me as one of thy hired servants." The Father did not allow him to say this much. No, a wandering child he was, but a child still, and he must be treated as such. This is true of every returning backslider.

Many are kept back by their not seeing this truth. Striving to take the position of unconverted men, the instinct of the "new creature" somehow revolts. Such are like the multitudes of impotent folk waiting for the moving of the water. Brother, sister, however fallen, thou art a child of God. The image may be defaced, but it is there still; stamped by a Divine hand, it never can be entirely obliterated. Despise not thy birthright, I entreat thee, whatever may have been thy course. Come as His child to thy Father in heaven, and look for and plead for a child's pardon and blessing.

Lest I be misunderstood by any, I would fain utter a word of caution. There are here and there those who are in a most unsatisfactory state of soul, and who are always puzzling their brains as to whether or not they ever were children of God. Could some infallible only be found to tell them whether or not their past profession was false, and their supposed Christian experience a delusion, they would be at rest, and would then set themselves to seek the Lord

with their whole heart. To such I would say, No one, not even you yourself, can ever satisfactorily solve this problem. Better leave off all pondering of the matter, and come to Christ. His heart is full of love, His promises are most precious, His assurances are well suited to comfort you in your present state. Come to Him. Cast yourself upon Him. Trust Him, and all will be well.

III. I now come to my last point; viz., *the joyous experience of the backslider when restored.* Difficulties beset me when I attempt to describe it, because it so closely resembles ordinary Christian experience; but although so many of the main features are identical, in some respects there is a difference.

Pardon is once more enjoyed. The backslider has been in the position described by Peter, when he says he "cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins" (2 Peter i. 9); but his dim short-sightedness has now passed away. With clear vision he beholds "the land that is very far off," and his eyes see "the King in His beauty," even Jesus the ever-living One at God's right hand. The haziness of memory with which he once thought of forgiveness has given way to a bright and joyous assurance of pardon. During the season of darkness he has borne a weary burden; now, lightened and relieved, he rejoices once more "with joy unspeakable and full of glory," looking unto Jesus, in whom he has "redemption through His blood, the forgive-

ness of sins, according to the riches of His grace" (Eph. i. 7).

But this is not all. *Life is again realized.* A kind of torpor has been upon his spiritual system, a strange indescribable feeling has possessed him. Like a man under nightmare, striving to free himself from some imagined foe, he has struggled hard in his dreamlike state, but all in vain. But now the set time to visit him has arrived; and as a man who touches the jar charged with electricity receives a shock which vibrates through his whole system, so the backslider, as he again lays hold of the outstretched arm of the Saviour, has communicated to him a spiritual power which thrills his entire moral being. The experience cannot be denied. It is intensely real. The soul of the restored backslider tingles with renewed spiritual life and energy. Buoyancy and vigour take the place of torpor and lethargy. "The winter is past" from his soul. "The time of the singing of birds is come."

Peace now flows into the soul. Like a river, still, broad, and deep, flows the peace of the restored wanderer. "My peace I give unto you," says the Lord: "not as the world giveth give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (John xiv. 27). Sorry comfort, wretched make-believe peace can the world give; but the "my peace" of the Lord Jesus is a real thing. Like balm of Gilead do these precious words drop into the soul, to comfort the still fluttering heart of the backslider only just returned to fellowship with God.

And *with what zest work is entered into!* Not now, as in times of spiritual declension, have we to drag our unwilling selves into the harvest field. No, with cheerful alacrity we seek to gather full sheaves of ripe corn for the garner of the Lord. The delight of spiritual service, when undertaken in the power of the Holy Ghost (and none other can truly be called *spiritual* service) cannot possibly be over-estimated. Among the happy labourers in the vine-yard, none are more truly happy than he who has just returned from his devious course, who has afresh rejoiced in pardon, realized his life in Christ, and experienced peace with God. Work away, brother; do all the good you can, in all the ways you can. Work, for the night is coming. Your day will be all too short to shew your gratitude to God for the redoubled blessings of His grace.

We must remember that *all these happy experiences are heightened by contrast.* The man who has been blind for a season rejoices exceedingly when, by the skill of the oculist, he once more beholds the light. The one who has been confined in a loathsome dungeon deeply values his liberty when it is restored to him. He who has been sick knows best how to set a true estimate on the blessing of health. So does the joy of Christian experience seem sweet, inexpressibly sweet, to him who has long wandered on the mountains of sin and folly.

To sum up the joyous experience of the backslider *restored,* he is able to say with David, "O God,

Thou art my God." God is his, what more can he have?

> "I must have all things and abound,
> While God is God to me."

The light of God's countenance is lifted upon him, and the loving word, Abba, Father, once more drops from his lips as he draws near to the throne; the Lord Jesus is rejoiced in as a mighty Saviour, "a Friend that sticketh closer than a brother;" while the Holy Spirit, once grieved and well-nigh quenched, again bears witness and bears fruit. The triune Jehovah is the source of his unfailing delight. God grant that this may be the portion of each one of us now and evermore. Amen.

> "A debtor to mercy alone,
> Of covenant mercy I sing;
> Nor fear, with Thy righteousness on,
> My person and offering to bring.
> The terrors of law and of God,
> With me can have nothing to do;
> My Saviour's obedience and blood
> Hide all my transgressions from view.
>
> The work which His goodness began,
> The arm of His strength will complete;
> His promise is yea and amen,
> And never was forfeited yet.
> Things future nor things that are now,
> Not all things below nor above,
> Can make Him His purpose forego,
> Or sever my soul from His love.

My name from the palms of His hands
Eternity will not erase ;
Impressed on His heart it remains,
In marks of indelible grace.
Yes, I to the end shall endure,
As sure as the earnest is given :
More happy, but not more secure,
The glorified spirits in heaven."



VII.

TO THE CHRISTIAN READER.

BELOVED Brother, I rejoice unfeignedly to think that this will be read by many believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, who have not consciously backslidden either in heart or in life, but whose unclouded "fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ," by the Holy Ghost. To such I would fain address a few words of loving Christian salutation. We rejoice to know that the appeals on the subject of backsliding, which are enlarged upon in the preceding pages have no direct application to you otherwise than as salutary warnings. Warnings are salutary. When the Apostle Paul thrice said, "Beware," to the saints at Philippi, he prefaced his warning with the assurance "for you it is safe" (Phil. iii. 1). Almost the last word written by Peter, the restored backslider, is one of solemn warning, "Beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness" (2 Pet. iii. 17). Doubt not Him "who is able to keep you from falling," but doubt yourself, my brother. Watch as well as pray "lest ye enter into temptation." No true Christian experience can ever lead us beyond this.

There is no standing still in the Christian life. Standing fast there is, but that is very different from

standing still. To stand still is to begin to backslide. The true safeguard against sliding back is steady going forward. Progress is the law of the Christian life. Progress in knowledge through prayerful study of the word of God; progress in work, seeking more and more to sink self and glorify Christ; progress in personal character, adding to faith virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, and charity. The power for all true progress is from God, through Christ, by faith; but in order thereto we must be found "giving all diligence." Just because it is God that worketh in us "both to will and to do of His good pleasure" must we "work out our own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. ii. 13). Here is no question as between faith and works, as if opposed to each other, but we are taught that all our works as Christians must be wrought in the power of God, which is received by us through faith. When this is seen, all is comparatively clear; and although conflict does not cease, victory and not defeat will be our happy, though possibly not our uniform, experience. While our proper individuality is not lost sight of, and our responsibility is not ignored, self will be sunk, and the Lord Jesus magnified.

It is important to remember the close connection which is ever maintained in Scripture between our enjoyment of God and our devotion to Him, or what we may call a full grasp and a full surrender. Thus the expression, "My beloved is mine," implies the *believer's* full grasp of Christ, while "I am His" im-

plies his equally full surrender to Him. These are not two truths, but two parts of one truth. "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder." We have substantially the same thought in Isaiah xli. Verse 10 gives us God's promise, "Yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness," the right hand being expressive of power. Verse 13 presents us with the counterpart of this truth, or God's claim on those to whom He makes the promise, "I the Lord will hold thy right hand," our right hand in God's implying full and unreserved surrender, our power given up to Him. It is only when thus hand in hand with Jehovah that we experience the might of His help. God's claim being to the full admitted, God's promise will be to the full enjoyed. It is the same all through the word of God. Dispensations change, but "His truth endureth to all generations." Much doctrine is taught, and many precepts are enforced, but each in its own order: doctrine, setting forth God's fulness of grace toward us; precept, shewing the prompt obedience we should render to Him. It is in the power of the doctrine taught that we are able to comply with the precept, and yet it is also by complying fully with the precept that the blessing of the doctrine is more richly experienced. Capital is needful to carry on business, but by carrying on business with success, capital is thereby increased. "All things are yours," says the Apostle; this is the capital of the Christian, given him by his heavenly Father. "Ye are Christ's" is

the next sentence; and this is the business of daily life, to be carried on by practical holiness and self-denial in the world. How are we to live as shewing that we are Christ's? only in the power of the truth that all things are ours. And yet the more thorough our devotion to His service, the more real our denial of self for His sake, the more fully will the Spirit of God teach us of the "all things" which are ours. So our working capital will be increased, and our business will by God's blessing prosper from day to day. Thus "the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day" (Prov. iv. 18).

I heard lately of a young man who, on his first coming to the Lord Jesus, and trusting Him for salvation, was filled with peace and joy. After a time, however, his experience was clouded, and he got into partial darkness of soul. In his distress he applied for counsel to an older Christian than himself. This good brother asked him, "Well, and when you came to the Lord Jesus, what were you?" "I was nothing at all," was the reply. "And what was He?" "He was everything." "Well, and which of you has broken down?" asked the old man, with much earnestness; "has Christ ceased to be everything?" "No," said the youth. "Ah! then I fear you have ceased to be nothing." Brethren, is there not teaching for all of us in this simple story? It is when we cease to be nothing that we fail to rejoice in Christ as everything. The Lord keep us then, even in the very middle of

the narrow way, "growing in grace" daily, "and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." May our cry to our heavenly Father be, "Let Thy hand be upon the man of Thy right hand, upon the Son of man whom Thou madest strong for Thyself." Then will our solemn profession be, "So WILL NOT WE GO BACK FROM THEE" (Ps. lxxx. 17, 18).

"Oh! to be nothing, nothing,
Only to lie at His feet
A broken emptied vessel,
Thus for His use made meet.
Emptied, that He may fill me,
As to His service I go;
Broken, so that unhindered
Through me His life may flow.

Oh! to be nothing, nothing,
An arrow hid in His hand;
A messenger at His gateway,
Waiting for His command.
Only an instrument ready
For Him to use at His will,
Or should He not require me,
Willing to wait there still."



VIII.

TO THE UNCONVERTED READER.

BELOVED Friend, I venture thus specially to address you, because I am not without hope that this little book may be looked into, and even read, by many of your class. I think I know something of what your general impression will be. Some such thought as this will be in your mind: "Well, if Christianity is such a limping, tottering thing, is it worth my while seriously to seek it as my portion?" But such a reflection is, I think, unjust. Please bear in mind that the experience described in the preceding pages is the exceptional and not the habitual experience of Christians; at least, we think it should be. There are tens of thousands of believers who are not backsliders, and because some such have occasionally to be dealt with, it is a great mistake to think of Christianity as being weak and inefficient. It is as if a prisoner, looking out of the window of his prison, were to see a lame man here and there among the passers by, and therefore conclude that liberty was not worth having; or, as if a blind man were to refuse sight because he heard that some seeing men had to wear spectacles. Besides, Christianity cannot fairly be credited with the faults of its professors. Even in the healthiest regions we meet with occasional invalids, and in districts noted for the longevity of their inhabi-

tants, some die young. To judge Christianity aright, we must judge it by its principles and teachings, rather than by any of its exponents. Certainly, it falls to be judged, not by its occasional bad fruit, but rather by its habitual good fruit, which we rejoice to know is to be found in great abundance. Even an occasional downright hypocrite need not altogether discourage the seeker after truth, any more than the tender of a bad half-crown should lead us to refuse all half-crowns for the future.

To say that we are deeply interested in your eternal well-being is to say that of which you would not be convinced, even though you were assured of it a thousand times. We are satisfied to leave this with God, who knoweth our hearts, and we must wait for the verdict of your conscience, as to whether we are in earnest or not. We present to you "the Gospel of Christ," believing it to be "the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth." We would plead with you to trust Jesus our Lord, who is set forth in that Gospel, both for life and for death, or rather both because you must live, and because you must die.

First, *because you must live.* The mere natural life we live in this world is a solemn reality. To die right may be desirable. To live right is indispensable. And how can we live right? To do so we must rightly understand *the object of life.* What is it? To enjoy ourselves? To make money? To secure the esteem of our fellows? No; life has higher aims and nobler objects than any or all of these. "Man's chief end is

to glorify God." How can this be done? The hardy Canute, as he sat on the shore, commanded the tide to recede, but still it flowed; and we by natural power may strive to resist evil and yield ourselves to God, but all in vain. Self, in one shape or another, absorbs our powers and affections, while God is dishonoured and robbed of the glory which should be rendered to Him as His due. Put to yourself the question, What am I living for? It is a question that will waken strange echoes in the chambers of your heart. Wait till they have died away, and then in calmness and quietness of soul hear the answer. Only be true to yourself, and you will come to the conclusion that yours is a misspent, if not a wasted life.

Yes, because you must live, we want you to come to Jesus. And why? Because He will then be your life; its power, its joy, its object. "For me to live is Christ," said the apostle Paul, with wondrous fulness of meaning. No other life is worth living. All else is vanity. My dear friend, if you would truly live, you must know Christ, and receive Him by faith. Then, when you can say with Paul, "Christ liveth in me," you will live indeed. Till then you pass through mere existence, a kind of living death, a dream-like state not worthy of the name of life.

We have seen in the preceding pages something of the terrible allurements of sin and worldliness, and how some even of the children of God have been overcome thereby for a season. If these things are so strong as to overcome the children of God, what

power must they have upon you who are alone, not linked with the strength of the Mighty One? You do not feel this, I dare say, because there is not in you the principle of resistance which is imparted by the grace of God. You are satisfied to float down stream, while the Christian is striving to swim up, even though sometimes turned back for a short season by the force of the current. Think of this, I implore you, and put not from you as harsh, words which are meant in love, and are only put plainly in order to reach your conscience. I pray they may do so by the power of God. May the question, "What am I living for?" ring in your ears, and shew you that because you must live, it is wise and reasonable and right that you should flee to Jesus, and trust in Him.

But there is another reason why the Gospel we preach is specially suited to your case. *You must die.* But a few short years, a very few with some, and "the last enemy" will lay his clammy hand upon you, and say in tones which admit of no denial, "Come, come away." The Lord may come the meanwhile, in which case the fate of the rejector will be the same as if seized by death; but probably all whose eyes now rest upon this page must shortly die. "After death the judgment." Death fixes our doom. "Where the tree falleth, there it shall be." Can this be true, and yet so very many heed not the Gospel warnings, and receive not its invitations? Alas! yes. "All men think all men mortal but themselves," and so put off the consideration of the matter to "a convenient

season," which for many never arrives. Matters, trivial in themselves, but looked upon as all-important, such as business, family, pleasures, etc., must have immediate attention, while eternal interests are virtually told that they can wait. "The things which are seen" are looked at, instead of "the things which are not seen." The unreal is dealt with as if it were real. Time is treated almost as if it were eternity. O my friend, is it thus that the devil bewilders you, and deludes you? Is it thus that you sport with your immortal soul? Pause, I entreat you, and think most solemnly. Without Christ you cannot truly live, and without Him you cannot safely die. Think then, I beseech you, of the Gospel we urge upon your attention, and of the Saviour who is therein proclaimed.

Strange as it may appear, in this so-called Christian land there are multitudes who have a most vague notion of the way of salvation. This vagueness is largely caused by unscriptural views of our own state as in the sight of God, loose ideas about man's sinfulness and man's powerlessness. Let a man be brought to see that however moral and amiable or even formally religious he may be, he is only a sinner, one whose "heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked;" and however well disposed and anxious to please God, still he is helpless, because "they tha are in the flesh cannot please God;" let him learn further, by the teaching of the Holy Ghost, that "by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh *be* justified in His sight," and a certain advance in

knowledge has been made. These truths being fully acknowledged, half the battle is fought; for though the citadel may not yet be taken, the outworks have fallen. Those who have learned this much by the teaching of the Spirit are like the good ground into which the seed is cast. They hear the word, and receive it with understanding, and bring forth fruit, some thirty-fold, some sixty, and some an hundred-fold.

Sinful, helpless, and unable to justify himself before God, what man wants is a Saviour, "a Saviour which is Christ the Lord," just such an one as is presented to us in the Gospel. The God of truth there bears testimony to His Son, to His power, wisdom, love, and all-sufficiency. He makes Him known to us as One who lived under the law, that He might fulfil all righteousness; who died under the curse, that He might secure our salvation; and who rose in triumph, that we might be "begotten again unto a lively hope."

Thank God, the work that saves has not to be done; it is done, finished on the cross, and God's acceptance of Christ as the sinner's substitute is declared in the resurrection. That is God's endorsing by a mighty act the word that rung out from Calvary, "It is finished." Now God testifies to His Son as to the One who finished the work, who put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself, who was buried, and rose again, who ever lives "mighty to save;" and the blessed assurance is given us, "Whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life."

There are but two sets of religionists in the whole

world, the unhappy kind and the happy kind. The first are those who, be they nominally Christian or heathen, catholic or protestant, are trusting in efforts of their own to save themselves, and who are ever striving by their works to make peace with an unseen and unknown God whom they have offended. These people have just religion enough to make them miserable. They take it in periodical doses, as if it were a nauseous drug, with much reluctance and many a wry face. Such is not the religion of God. The others, the happy kind, are those who have come to an end of themselves and of all self's efforts. Seeing by the light of God's Spirit the pollution of the source of all effort, the heart, they acknowledge the tainted character of all human works; they confess that such cannot be acceptable to the pure and holy God. Renouncing all these, the happy religionists have no confidence in themselves, but put their trust in another, even in Jesus, the Son of the living God, the Saviour made known to us in the Gospel. Trusting in Him, there is peace in the enjoyment of pardon, and a quiet, calm assurance of personal salvation. O my friend, could you but imagine for a moment the joy of those who truly trust Christ, and seek to live for Him, you would not rest till such was your own experience. You would come to Him, cast yourself upon Him, trust Him, commit your soul and all its interests to His keeping, and become "a new creature" in Him. This would be to you the commencement of a new life; for new principles actuate and new aims

attract the man who has learned to love the Lord Jesus Christ. This is also the true preparation for death, death's antidote, in fact; for the triumphant song of the believer is, "O death, where is thy sting?"

Brother, suffer me in all love and earnestness to plead with you for instant decision. Come to the Saviour now, and trust Him. Joy here, and eternal inheritance hereafter, will then be your portion. But if you reject Him, you remain "dead in trespasses and sins," and endless misery in hell must be your doom. The Lord in His mercy save us from such a fate. Amen.

"Come, ye weary, heavy laden,
Lost and ruined by the fall;
If you tarry till you're better,
You will never come at all:
Not the righteous,
Sinners, Jesus came to call.

View Him prostrate in the garden;
On the ground your Maker lies!
On the bloody tree behold Him;
Hear Him cry, before He dies,
"It is finished!"
Sinners, will not this suffice?

Lo! the incarnate God, ascended,
Pleads the merit of His blood;
Venture on Him, venture wholly,
Let no other trust intrude;
None but Jesus
Can do helpless sinners good."

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